

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, January 24, 1901, by Frank Tousey.

No. 61.

NEW YORK, FEBRUARY 21, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

THE JAMES BOYS AMONG THE CLOUDS;

OR,

THE BOLD DETECTIVE'S FEARFUL PLUNGE.

BY D.W. STEVENS.



Again Carl Greene and his two companions fired at the Bandits. This time a bullet whizzed through the hat of Jesse James, while another grazed the cheek of one of the other robbers.

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CHAPTER I.

HOLDING UP A DEPUTY SHERIFF.

Ten rough-looking men were seated in the long grass that grew in profusion in a small opening in the heart of the Big Blue forest in Central Missouri.

This opening was a few hundred feet from the highway. At the edge of the latter sat another rough-looking character, who, every moment or two, would glance up and down the road, of which he could command a view for fully a mile in either direction.

Around the edges of the opening in the forest were tied the horses which evidently belonged to the men.

These had the appearance of blooded animals, and they champed at their bits and pawed the turf in a restless manner, as if the idleness which had been forced upon them was disagreeable.

Suddenly the man by the roadside sprang to his feet, and exclaimed:

"Here comes some one!"

The others were instantly upon their feet. Around the waist of each man was a cartridge belt, which held at least one revolver.

The men were desperate-looking characters.

"Can you make out who it is, Clell Miller?" called out the man who appeared to be the leader of the party.

"Now I can, Frank James!"

"Who is it?"

"It is your brother!"

"Are you sure it is Jesse James?"

"I am."

"He rides a black horse, then?"

"Yes; it is his black horse. No other animal than Siroc can step like that."

"Is he riding fast?"

"I never saw him ride faster."

"Then there is work for us," said the man who had been called Frank James, and who was none other than the brother and lieutenant of Jesse James, the famous bandit leader.

The others were members of the James' band of outlaws, whose name was a terror to travelers in that portion of Missouri.

The bandits now carefully examined their weapons which they replaced in their belts, and then adjusted small masks to their faces.

Then going to their horses, they untied these, and prepared to mount.

A moment later a black horse, mounted by a man with a tall, commanding figure, rode in among the bandits. It was Jesse James, the famous robber chief.

"Well, Jesse, do you bring us any news?" asked Frank James.

"Yes," replied Jesse James.

As he said this he nodded his head in a significant manner. Then he added:

"That's right! You have on your masks and are mounting. How did you know there was likely to be some business for us?"

"Because," said Frank James, "Clell Miller saw you riding hard. If there hadn't been anything in the wind you would have spared Siroc."

The outlaw chief laughed, and, producing his mask, proceeded to adjust it. As he did so, he said:

"Clell Miller is a clear-headed fellow. Something is in the wind."

"What is it?"

"A stage coach."

"A stage coach? Why, we didn't look for any on this road to-day."

"I don't know why the stage is coming this road to-day, but I know that it is coming."

"Perhaps they thought that we would work the other road to-day, and so they took this road."

This suggestion came from Clell Miller, who had just come in from the road.

"You are right, again, Clell Miller," said Jesse James. "But could you see the coach?"

"It was just coming round the bend as I left the road," said Clell Miller.

The latter then hurried to his horse and prepared to mount.

A moment later the bandits were at the edge of the road, mounted and ready for action.

"Don't show yourselves yet, boys," said Jesse James, dismounting and shielding his tall figure behind some bushes in such a way that he could not be seen from up the highway.

He then glanced up the road and said to a bandit named Wood Hite:

"There they come!"

Wood Hite chuckled to himself and muttered:

"The fish are swimming right into our net!"

"Hold on, though," said Jesse James.

"What's the matter?"

"The coach has pulled up."

"Pulled up?"

"Yes."

"They can't have seen us?"

"No. I can make out a man with his head sticking out of the coach window."

"Is he talking to the driver?"

"Yes, and the driver seems to be looking back up the road."

"Perhaps the passenger finds that he's left some of his valuables back at the tavern where they had breakfast," suggested a robber named Jim Cummins.

Another suggestion was now made by another robber, who was named Carl Haight. It was:

"Perhaps they have got a mounted escort that has fallen behind."

"Perhaps that's it, Carl Haight," said the bandit chief. "But if it's so, we'll go down and hold them up before the escort comes up."

"That's the talk!" exclaimed Frank James.

The robber chief sprang into the saddle, and then turned out into the road, followed by his gang.

They now rode slowly toward the coach, which seemed to have stopped a little more than half way between the point at which the gang had been hiding and the bend in the road.

The driver of the coach had evidently observed the approaching bandits. He called out in an excited manner to the passenger who had been talking with him, and at the same time pointed with his whip down the road.

"Come, boys!" cried Jesse James. "The sooner we get to work the better."

As he said this the outlaw chieftain put spurs to Siroc, and the horse suddenly increased his speed and dashed up the road, followed closely by Jim Malone, the handsome animal ridden by Frank James. The other robbers urged the horses they rode to improve their pace at the same time.

Suddenly a shout went up from the passengers, who were now standing outside the coach.

Jesse James heard this, and as he did so glanced up the road.

Then he suddenly reined in his horse.

His example was followed by the other bandits.

Frank James uttered an angry exclamation.

"What's the matter?" demanded a bandit named Dick Little.

The outlaw chief pointed up the road beyond the coach.

A troop of about thirty horsemen had just turned the bend, and were now riding rapidly down the road.

"It must be Timberlake," said Jesse James.

"It can't be a mounted escort," said Frank James.

"No, they wouldn't have that many in a stage escort. It's the sheriff and his posse."

"So he's turned out again?"

"Yes. But I should have thought he would be looking for us on the other side of the river."

"As it is, the stage got the escort of Timberlake free."

"And the sheriff has done us out of a neat job again. But there's no use of kicking about it."

"What's to be done, Jesse James?"

"Out and run, of course."

"We ought to wind the posse in a few miles."

"Yes. Our horses are fresh, while theirs have been traveling at least a couple of hours."

"At least that."

Jesse James wheeled Siroc around and turned down the road, followed by his gang.

Another shout now went up from the passengers of the stage coach.

Jesse James glanced over his shoulder, and then shaking his clenched left hand in the direction of the stage, cried:

"If Timberlake wasn't back of you, perhaps you'd keep your mouths closed."

"Yes," said Frank James, "and they would be ready enough to hold up their hands."

"And we would be ready enough to go through their pockets," said Wood Hite.

A moment later the bandits reached the bend in the road. As they turned they could see the posse dashing by the stage.

The passengers were waving their hats to the passing horsemen.

The bandits hurried down the next stretch of road, which run

between the tall forest trees for nearly two miles as straight as an arrow.

A few minutes later one of the robbers glanced over his shoulder and cried:

"There they come!"

"They are not gaining!" said Jesse, in a tone that showed he was positive about the matter, although he had not taken the trouble to look back.

"No!" said the other, again glancing back, as if to reassure himself.

"I thought not!"

A few minutes later the robbers reached the end of the stretch and began to turn the bend.

Jesse James looked back and said:

"We have gained a little! The stage coach is just coming around the last bend!"

"I say," said Frank James to his brother, as they turned another long stretch of road.

"What is it?" asked Jesse James.

"I've got an idea!"

"What is it?"

"The posse is keeping all together, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And the stage is dropping behind?"

"Yes; way behind!"

"After we turn the next bend——"

"It's about a mile and a half further down?"

"About that! After we turn it, the most of us had better turn off into the woods!"

"What for?"

"To lay for the stage coach!"

"I see! And the rest of us keep on so as to draw Timberlake after us?"

"Yes."

"A good idea, Frank James."

"How many of us would you have go on?"

"I would have the fastest horses go on."

"Siroc and Jim Malone are way ahead of the other animals," said Frank James.

"For that reason we two had better go on ahead."

"I think so."

"We'll work it that way! I would like to have a chance at those fellows in the stage coach; but it will take the very best horses to double on Timberlake, after we have drawn him a way further down the road."

"That's so."

"And after the rest of the boys have held up the coach, they'd better take to the woods."

"Where had we better meet?"

"Bill Catlin's old hut would be a good place."

"On the old bridle path, just this side of the 'long swamp'?"

"Yes."

"It would be a good place. Do you know whether Bill is around these days?"

"I don't. But it won't make any difference whether Bill is around or not."

In a few minutes the end of the stretch was reached.

The sheriff's party had lost a little upon the robbers, but the stage was not yet in sight.

As soon as the bend had been turned, Jesse James pulled in his horse.

"Jim Cummins," said the bandit chief, as his followers reined in.

"What, Jesse James?"

"You and all the men except Frank James are to lay for the stage coach here!"

"It's way behind the posse!"

"Yes: draw back into the woods until after the posse have gone by!"

"While you go ahead so as to draw them after you?"

"Yes. And after you have held up the coach go over to Bill Catlin's place. You can find it."

"Easy enough."

"Very good. Frank and I will meet you there."

"And take your shares of what we get out of the coach?"

"We will be willing to do that. But hold up the coach without shooting if you can."

"Are you afraid that the posse might hear the shooting and come back?"

"Yes."

"But if the people in the stage shoot?"

"Then you'll have to make a noise."

"We'll do the job as quietly as possible."

"That's right. Come, Frank."

The bandit chief urged forward his horse and was followed closely by his brother Frank.

The road for about a mile ahead of them was broad and smooth.

In fact, it seemed to invite a race between horses that possessed speed.

The James Boys glanced first down the road and then at each other.

Then without uttering a word they proceeded to put their horses upon their mettle.

Siroc was slightly in the lead. That magnificent animal bounded forward at full speed, while Jim Malone felt himself being urged to do his best by his master.

The latter horse now put on a burst of speed that astonished even his partial master.

Jim Malone drew up even with Siroc, and for fully half a mile the two horses sped along neck and neck.

The band, of which Jim Cummins had just taken charge, remained at the edge of the road, and, forgetful of their orders to draw back into the wood, eagerly watched the race.

"I'll bet on Siroc!" exclaimed Wood Hite.

"I'll back Jim Malone!" cried Clell Miller.

"How much for?"

"For my share of what we get out of the stage."

"Done!"

An instant later Siroc began to draw ahead of Jim Malone.

"I've won!" said Wood Hite.

"Not yet!" said Clell Miller.

Siroc stumbled slightly and Jim Malone dashed by him.

An instant later Siroc dashed up abreast of his rival. The horses were neck and neck until the end of the stretch was reached.

Both riders then drew rein.

At that instant they saw coming around the bend ahead of them five horsemen.

"It's one of Timberlake's deputies and four of his men," said Jesse James.

The bandit chief looked back to see if his men were yet in sight. They had already turned into the forest.

"Let us take off our masks," said Jesse James.

The two bandits quickly removed their masks.

"You are going to pretend that we are Timberlake's men, I suppose?" said Frank James.

"Yes," replied Jesse James.

Followed by his brother, the bandit chief rode boldly up to the newcomers. The latter drew up in the road.

"Sheriff Timberlake is coming right up," said Jesse James, as he came up to them, "and he told me to tell you that you could wait for him here."

"All right," said the man who appeared to be the deputy.

"You didn't see any of his other deputies while you were coming up the road?"

"No."

"He sent us on ahead to tell all the deputies that we might see to wait for him."

"All right," said the deputy. "Do you know where the James Boys are?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Here!" said Jesse James, drawing his revolver and covering the deputy.

The latter had evidently been taken by surprise, and had no thought of making any resistance.

"Hands up!" said Jesse James.

The deputy instantly held up his hands, as did his four men, each one of whom seemed to think that the bandit was aiming at him.

Jesse James called out to his brother:

"Keep them covered while I go through their pockets."

Frank held up his cocked revolver ready to shoot the first man who should resist his brother.

The latter proceeded to go through the pockets of the deputy and his four men.

Timberlake and his posse now came in sight, and were astonished to see two of the robbers holding up a party of horsemen before their very eyes.

It took Jesse James less than a moment to go through the pockets of the five men and to transfer their money to his own pocket.

One had seventy-five dollars and another fifty, while the other three had smaller sums.

Having secured the money, the bandit chief and his brother put spurs to their horses and dashed down the road, leaving the deputy to explain matters to Sheriff Timberlake as best he could.

"How much did you get?" asked Frank James as they rode rapidly around the bend.

"A little over two hundred dollars."

"That was a good haul."

CHAPTER II.

A GAME OF BLUFF.

The two bandits, after turning the bend, had found themselves upon a long stretch of straight road, along which their fleet horses sped at a rapid pace.

Presently Frank James looked over his shoulder and said:

"They are not in sight yet."

"We mustn't gain too fast on them."

"That's so."

"We must keep them after us until the boys have had time to hold up the stage."

"Then we had better slow up a bit."

They accordingly reduced their speed to an easy trot.

Presently Frank James looked over his shoulder and said:

"They are coming around the bend!"

"What is that?" said Jesse James, as he tightened Siroc's rein and listened.

The report of firearms proceeding from some distance up the road could now be plainly heard.

Timberlake's party had evidently heard the noise also, and had pulled up.

"Let's keep on," said Jesse James, now giving his horse free rein. "We don't want them to suspect that we know where the firing comes from."

"That's it. So Jim Cummins couldn't hold up the coach without firing. It's too bad!"

"The chances are he had to fire."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"The coach had to be held up, you know."

"Perhaps the people in the coach did all the firing."

Again the report of firearms from up the road reached their ears.

"Frank, I've got quite a notion that our boys are taking a hand in that," said the other.

The two robbers kept on, and rapidly approached the next bend in the road.

As they did so two travelers rode round the bend, and upon seeing the two bandits, manifested alarm.

"Frank," said the bandit chief, "it will be a shame if we let these fellows pass without holding them up."

"That is so," said the other.

The two outlaws now rode boldly up to the travelers and raised their pistols.

"Hands up!" cried Jesse James.

The travelers quickly raised their hands.

"Keep them covered while I see how their pockets are lined," said the bandit chief to his brother.

Frank James kept his pistol in readiness for use while Jesse went through the pockets of the travelers, which were found to contain altogether a little less than two hundred dollars.

Timberlake had apparently been undecided whether to follow the two James brothers or to return in the direction from which the firing had proceeded.

But upon seeing the robbers again at their work before his very eyes, the sheriff started toward them, followed by his men.

Having secured the money, Jesse James and his brother spurred their horses down the road, and soon turned the next bend. As they did so Jesse said:

"We ought to double on Timberlake pretty soon."

"That is so."

"I suppose we could turn in here anywhere," continued Jesse James, soon after they had cleared the bend.

"Yes."

"How swampy it is on both sides of the road. Let's ride a bit farther before turning in."

"All right."

They rode on several hundred yards, and then Jesse James said:

"It's getting swampier."

"This can't be the deep swamp," said Frank, pulling in rein.

"Yes; it is the deep swamp," said Jesse, nodding his head in a decided way.

"How far does the swamp run, Jesse?" asked Frank.

"About three miles."

"I remember now. It goes right on to Harbeck's Corners, or does it end this side?"

"Harbeck's Corners begins right where the swamp ends."

"Now I remember."

"We'll go through the Corners and take to the woods."

"But it's open ground for a couple of miles beyond the Corners. We have drawn Timberlake on too far."

Just then a carriage dashed round the next bend in the road, which was about a quarter of a mile further on. The driver of the carriage evidently saw the bandits, for he pulled in his horse and turned as if to call out to some one inside the vehicle.

"We ought to hold up that carriage," said Jesse James to his brother.

The latter shook his head and said:

"It won't do us any good to hold up that carriage."

"Why not?"

"Don't you see what's beyond it?"

Jesse looked beyond the carriage and saw a mounted escort of ten men coming up.

"And they have Winchesters," said Frank James. "What's to be done now?"

"Only one thing that I know of."

"What's that?"

"Try a game of bluff."

Jesse James dug the spurs into the sides of Siroc, and that animal dashed forward, with Jim Malone close at his heels. As they came up with the carriage the bandit chief looked over his shoulder as if he were in great alarm, and cried out to the driver:

"The robbers are after us!"

Frank James took the hint from this and also looked over his shoulder with a pretended look of alarm.

An old gentleman stuck his head out of the window and called out:

"Stop! what's the matter?"

To this call neither of the bandits made any response. They now turned their attention to the armed escort, which had halted.

"The robbers are after us!" cried Jesse James, as he dashed toward the escort, followed closely by his brother.

Then in a lower voice, the bandit chief said to his brother:

"Follow me closely."

When within about a rod of the escort, Jesse James pretended to pull in on his reins.

The leader of the escort evidently imagined that he was about to halt.

But instead of this Jesse James suddenly spurred forward Siroc and dashed through the escort like a flash.

This maneuver was followed by Frank James.

Before the astonished members of the escort could realize it, the two bandits were by them, and flying swiftly down the road.

The leader of the escort had been taken completely by surprise. The members of his party turned to him as if in expectation of receiving orders to fire.

But before he seemed to have decided that it might be worth while to fire at the flying bandits, the latter were already nearly out of range.

"Let them go, whoever they are!" he muttered. "I never was so much taken by surprise in my life!"

The carriage and the escort then proceeded up the road, while Jesse James and his brother kept on and soon turned the next bend.

The swamp now grew even worse than it had been before.

"The sheriff will stop to compare notes with the carriage and the escort," said Jesse James to his brother, "so we are now sure of a good lead."

"That is so."

"As I said before we were interrupted by that last crowd, it is too bad we drew Timberlake on so far, but there is no help for it now, so we must keep on a couple of miles beyond the Corners, and then take to the woods."

"Yes, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Nick Gray should be in his shop."

"You mean the blacksmith at the Corners?"

"Yes; his shop is the very first building we come to."

"I wish we could count upon some of the other people at the Corners besides Nick."

"But we can't."

Frank shook his head and said:

"Nick Gray is the only one we can depend upon."

"When do we catch sight of the blacksmith's shop?"

"When we pass that big, leaning pine tree we'll be close onto Nick's place."

An instant later the two bandits passed the leaning pine tree. Then, with a look of astonishment, Jesse James pointed out into the open ground to the right of him, and exclaimed:

"What is that?"

Frank looked and saw a crowd of several hundred persons gathered around what appeared to be a small inclosure. In the middle of this inclosure was a large object of a whiteish color which seemed to reach a few feet above the heads of the people.

"I give it up, Jesse James."

"Nick will tell us. See, his shop is open."

They turned their horses from the road and dashed into the open door some twenty feet back from the highway.

A stout, red-faced man, wearing a leather apron, had been working the bellows upon a fire in the forge.

He looked up in astonishment at the two outlaws.

"Well, well, Jesse James!" he said.

"You wasn't looking for us, Nick Gray?"

"No, I wa'n't."

"The sheriff's men are after us."

"Then I'm 'fraid they've got you in a tight corner."

"We can go out into your yard, and you can close the back door of the shop on us."

"I can do that."

"And the bushes will be high enough to hide the horses."

"I guess so. But if the sheriff's folks stop here, what then?"

"Tell them that you saw us go by—that we're out there in that crowd."

"I can do that."

"What's the crowd there for, anyhow? I never saw a crowd like that at the Corners."

Nick Gray shook his head.

"Nor any one else, I reckon."

"What's up?"

"Why, Prof. Parker is going up."

"What, in a balloon?"

"Yes. They're fillin' of the balloon now."

"Why ain't you out there, too, Nick?"

"I've got a little iron work that's got to be done by to-night. But it's lucky for you I wa'n't out there."

"That's so. For we would have been forced to go on and would have been seen by some of the crowd."

"And the crowd up this way don't like you much."

"No; the fools don't appreciate us."

The two bandits now dismounted and led their horses through the back door into a small yard which was surrounded by bushes of an unusual height, and standing very close together.

Nick Gray closed the door after the men.

A moment later Timberlake pulled up his horse in the road opposite the shop. His men followed his example and reined in their horses as fast as they came up.

"Wait here, boys," said the sheriff, advancing toward the door of the shop.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRISONERS—THE LITTLE SATCHEL.

Nick Gray kept on singing while he worked the bellows. He stood with his back toward the door which the sheriff was approaching.

"Helloah!" cried the sheriff.

The blacksmith seemed unconscious of the fact that any one had spoken to him, and swinging his head as if to keep time to the music, sang louder than before.

"I say there!" shouted Timberlake.

Nick bent over the forge and, heaping more coal upon the fire, burst out into a loud chorus.

"The man must be deaf," said Timberlake, dismounting from his horse and entering the shop. Then he cried out at the top of his voice:

"Helloah, there!"

No answer.

"Are you deaf?"

Nick Gray turned around and seemed to be greatly surprised at the fact that the sheriff had entered the place.

"I didn't see you, sir," said Nick Gray.

"I shouldn't think you did," replied the sheriff.

"No, I didn't. Now look at here, stranger. I'm busy to-day. I'd like to do anything for you, but I hain't got no time."

"Yes, you have got time for what I want."

"No, I hain't."

"All I want is to know whether you saw two men ride by——"

"A good many men might have rode by here without my knowing anything about it. There's a big crowd over yon watching 'em fill the balloon."

"But what I want to know is, have you seen two men ride by here within a few minutes?"

"Within a few minutes?"

"Yes."

"Come to think, now you speak of it, I did see a couple of men ride by here a little bit ago."

"Why didn't you say so, then?"

"It just come back to me now that I saw 'em. I didn't pay no 'tention to them when they went by. I was a-thinkin' of suthin' else."

"What sort of men were they?"

"What sort of men?"

"Yes."

"Pretty fair sort of men, I reckon. They didn't look as if there was anything agin 'em."

"Did either of them ride a fine, black horse?"

"Stranger, now you speak of it, I remember that one of 'em sat on as fine a black horse as ever I had the good luck to put shoes on."

"Was he a tall man?"

"He were a tall, fine-lookin' man I should say."

"Were they riding fast?"

"Pretty easy. Why, they must be over there watchin' Prof. Parker's balloon now."

The sheriff shook his head.

"I doubt it. But all the same, you have given some information, although you were a little slow about parting with it."

"I'm allers ready to give information, stranger," said Nick Gray, resuming his work.

Tie-lake returned to his men.

"Here, Smith, Winslow, Barber and Jones!" he said, singling out four of his party, "you stand here where the road comes out of the swamp."

"What will we do that for?" asked Barber.

"In order to see that the James Boys don't return this way."

"Are they likely to return this way?"

"If they want to get through this swamp they'll be likely to return this way, won't they?"

"I suppose so."

"Anyway watch for them here, while the rest of us go and look through the crowd."

"What's that noise?" cried Winslow, some little time afterward.

Loud shouts were now heard coming from up the road.

"It's the stage!" said Barber.

An instant later the stage coach swung round the bend and came into sight, accompanied by the detachment of the posse which had gone to the aid of the passengers when the firing had been heard.

As this detachment rode up Winslow called out to one of the men:

"So you rescued them, Jackson?"

Jackson shook his head.

"They rescued themselves, then?"

"I should say they did," replied Jackson, drawing in his horse.

The stage now swept by. The passengers were in high spirits, and several of them were indulging in a loud chorus.

"They are in good spirits, Jackson?" said Winslow, gazing after the coach.

"They have got reason to be."

"Then they drove off the robbers?"

"More than that!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that they captured three of the gang!"

"Three of the gang?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"They have got them inside the coach."

"Then there must have been a detective on the coach?"

"I think there was."

The shooting which was heard up the road by the James Boys and by the posse did not take place when Jim Cummins and the other bandits first rode up to the coach for which they had been lying in wait.

At first the robbers seemed to have it all their own way.

The hold-up, although naturally interesting to the robbers, struck some of them as being a very tame affair. The passengers seemed very willing to have their pockets searched, but their pockets contained little of value. There was but one watch found, and this was a nickel-plated one.

And it did not occur to the bandits when they went through the pockets of the timid-looking passengers that the latter were playing them a trick.

Yet such was the case.

A quarter of an hour before the coach fell into the hands of the robbers one of the passengers put his head out of the window and remarked:

"The posse is out of sight."

"They are chasing the robbers," said another.

"They will be sure to keep the road clear for us," said a third.

"I rather think they are overdoing the thing," said the first speaker, who had the look of a prosperous man of business.

He was well dressed, wore a high, silk hat and a full, neatly trimmed, black beard. His eyes, which appeared to trouble him somewhat, were covered by large, green spectacles.

"How do you mean that the posse are overdoing it?" asked the one who had expressed his belief that the posse were keeping the road clear.

"The greater portion of the gang might turn into the woods and wait until the posse went by."

"Yes."

"And then lay for us?"

"It is possible."

"I have an idea by which those of us who have any money can save it in that event."

"What is that?"

"Here is a little satchel."

As he said this, the gentleman with the black beard produced a small satchel which he opened. It contained nothing but a pack-

age, the contents of which was evidently a sandwich and a small flask which was nearly empty. He removed the package and the flask, which he placed in his lap, and then said:

"Let every gentleman place his valuables and his money in this little satchel. You had better leave a little money, say a couple of dollars and a little loose change, in your pockets."

"Why?" asked one.

"So as to put the robbers off their guard."

"Then what will you do with the satchel?"

The gentleman produced a long shawl pin, which he held up to the questioner, and said:

"I will put the satchel under the seat, not on the floor, but I will pin it by one of its rings to the bottom of the seat. Then if the robbers should hold us up, they would not be apt to look for your money and valuables where you will have them stored."

The doubter shook his head and said:

"That sounds well enough, but are we sure of getting our money back?"

"The satchel can be locked and the key can be given to any one the party will name," said the gentleman, pointing to a key in the lock of the satchel.

Just then the coach swung round a curve.

An instant later the driver pulled in his horses.

The doubter glanced out of the window and observed a group of mounted men, wearing masks, a short distance down the road. He drew in his head, and, trembling with alarm, exclaimed:

"The robbers are on us!"

Then drawing from his pocket a silver watch and a small roll of bills, he quickly thrust these into the open satchel which a moment before he had regarded with great contempt.

His example was instantly followed by the other passengers.

Every watch was thrown in except a nickel-plated one, the owner of which said:

"The robbers will be welcome to that watch. Its works gave out last night."

In the meantime, the doubter had again thrust his head through the window.

"Hurry up!" he whispered anxiously. "The robbers are riding up."

The gentleman quickly locked the satchel and, stooping down, removed the key.

Then taking the shawl pin, he put it through one of the rings of the satchel, and succeeded in fastening this securely in under the seat.

After which he sprang up, and, resuming his seat, quickly drew a revolver from his pocket and placed this under the cushion upon which he sat.

The other passengers who carried revolvers had already thrust their weapons under the cushions.

Scarcely had the gentleman with the black beard disposed of his revolver, when Jim Cummins, followed by Wood Hite and two others, appeared at the right door of the coach, while Carl Haight and Clell Miller, followed by another robber, appeared at the left door.

The robbers pointed their pistols at the passengers and cried out:

"Hands up!"

Up flew the hands of the passengers.

"Where is Dick Little?" asked Jim Cummins of one of the robbers who had followed him to the coach door.

"Why, Dick Little is back there holding up the driver," replied the fellow.

"Well, then, Wood Hite, you and Carl Haight and Clell Miller help me go through the pockets."

The three bandits who had been named prepared to assist their acting chief in the work of unloading the pockets of the passengers.

All four alighted from their horses, leaving the latter in charge of their companions.

The passengers all held up their hands very high. Instead of making any attempts to protect their pockets, they seemed even eager to have the search made as thorough as possible.

Dick Little now rode up and said to Jim Cummins:

"How much did you get?"

"Not more than twenty dollars in the whole crowd," said Jim Cummins, mounting his horse.

Dick Little shook his fist angrily in the direction of the stage door and cried out:

"It's an outrage!"

"I think, though, that Carl Haight got a watch."

"Yes," said the latter, examining the nickel-plated watch that did not run with a look of disgust.

Then, uttering an angry exclamation, Carl Haight went to the stage door and called out:

"Who was the gentleman that gave me this watch?"

The rightful owner of the watch exclaimed:

"Now I never warranted that watch! You can't say that I did now."

"I haven't."

"You took it without asking me anything about its real value. You know you did."

"That's true. All I want to know is did you give it to me?"

"I did."

"Then take it back."

"I refuse to do it."

Carl Haight pointed his pistol at the man's head and said:

"Take that watch back!"

"I suppose I must yield," said the passenger, reaching out his hand and taking the watch.

"Boys," said Dick Little, "I believe that they have been trying to fool us."

"What's that?"

"I believe that they have got their money and watches hid about the stage somewheres."

"You do?"

"I do. Perhaps they have it in their boots. Have you tried their boots?"

"No."

"Perhaps they've stuck their money there, or else under the seat cushions, or perhaps under the seats?"

"At any rate, Dick Little, we can look."

"Of course, we can."

"Look at here, you," called out Jim Cummins, dismounting and going to the coach door, "I want you passengers to tell me if you've got anything hid anywheres about the coach. If you have, we want it."

"I thought you had searched very thoroughly already," said the gentleman with the black beard.

"Well, sir, do you object to our searching again?" demanded the bandit.

"I do not."

Jim Cummins, followed by Wood Hite and Dick Little, who had also dismounted from his horse, now entered the coach in order to make the thorough search that one of them had suggested.

"Come, stand up, every one of you!" exclaimed Jim Cummins.

The passengers rose to their feet.

"To begin with, you will pull off your boots," said the acting chief.

Carl Haight then stepped into the coach and prepared to aid his companions in the search.

The gentleman who had acted as spokesman now said:

"Suppose we wear shoes instead of boots, as is the case with me?"

"Then off with your shoes?"

"Couldn't we take off our shoes better if we were sitting down?"

"Very likely you could, but first, Dick Little and Wood Hite had better look under the cushions."

Before this order could be obeyed the gentleman seized Wood Hite and, wrenching from him the pistol that he carried in his hand, flung him to the floor.

The bandit, in falling, struck his head against the seat and was stunned.

With the pistol that he had wrested from Wood Hite, the gentleman knocked Dick Little over the head. That bandit dropped senseless to the floor.

To do all this had been the work of but a moment.

But the man who had felled two of the robbers was not quick enough to prevent Jim Cummins and Carl Haight from leveling their revolvers at his head.

Yet with wonderful agility the brave gentleman now sprang forward and knocked Jim Cummins' pistol out of his hands.

At that instant a bullet from the pistol of Carl Haight grazed his shoulder. Then, turning upon the latter, he seized him by the right arm and wrenched the smoking pistol from his grasp. Two of the other passengers now threw themselves upon Carl Haight.

The pistol which had been knocked from the hands of Jim Cummins struck the roof of the coach and, glancing off, dropped in the opposite end of the conveyance.

Jim Cummins sprang through the door and cried out:

"Boys, they have attacked us! Give me a pistol, some one?"

The gentleman now appeared at the coach door with two pistols in his hands.

Bang!

Bang!

A bullet lodged itself in the left arm of Jim Cummins, which now dropped powerless at his side.

The other bullet grazed the neck of Wood Hite's horse, drawing blood.

The frightened animal now reared upward, and, then breaking loose from the man who had been holding its bridle, dashed down the road.

The gentleman had now cocked both his pistols, and two more of the passengers were standing by his side with pistols in their hands.

The wounded robber dodged behind his horse.

Four pistol shots rang out from the coach door, and at the same instant three shots were also fired from the opposite side of the coach.

Jim Cummins' horse fell in its tracks with two bullets in its body.

Upon the other side of the coach one of the robbers had received a wound in his shoulder.

Jim Cummins sprang up and, seizing the neck of Dick Little's horse, vaulted into the saddle. Then he spurred the animal toward the rear of the coach, behind which he expected to find shelter. Here he was joined an instant later by Clell Miller and the rest of his discomfited followers.

The robbers had been taken by surprise.

CHAPTER IV.

FINDING A CLEW.

"Where are the others?" demanded Clell Miller of the bandit who was temporarily in charge of the party.

"Dick Little and Wood Hite were knocked senseless, and Carl Haight was being roughly handled when——"

"When you came away?"

"Yes; and I came away quick, I can tell you."

"The odds were strongly against you?"

"About ten to one."

"Carl Haight, Wood Hite and Dick Little are prisoners, then?"

"Yes."

"We must set them free."

"How are we going to do it? Look at here."

Jim Cummins pointed to his left arm which still hung motionless by his side, and then added:

"I am out of the fight, you see."

Clell Miller rode around the side of the coach and called out:

"I say, there!"

The gentleman who had disarmed Clell Miller's comrades, now stuck his head out the window, and said:

"What is it?"

"You have three of our men inside there."

"We have."

"We want you to set them free."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"We do not want to set them free; and what is more, we will not set them free."

"Then we will have to take them."

"Try it if you want to."

Then leaning further out of the window, the gentleman called out:

"Driver, start up."

The driver cracked his whip, and a moment later the stage was again under way.

Clell Miller shouted to the other bandits to follow him, and dashed after the coach. All of the bandits, except Jim Cummins and the other man who had been wounded, followed their new leader.

"Stop!" called out Clell Miller, as they drew near the coach.

Four pistols were thrust out from the right windows of the coach and two from the left.

Six shots were fired almost simultaneously. A bullet passed through Clell Miller's hat, while one grazed the nose of the horse of another of the bandits, causing the animal to fling up its head and snort with pain.

"Give them a volley, boys!" cried Clell Miller.

The bandits raised their pistols and fired.

Bullets rattled against the back and sides of the coach, but caused no damage.

Again six shots were fired from the coach window, but this time the volley seemed to pass over the heads of the pursuing bandits.

The latter now fell back and waited for their two wounded comrades to come up.

Jim Cummins was looking very pale, and his wounded arm seemed to trouble him greatly.

"I suppose, Jim Cummins, that we will have to give it up?" said Clell Miller.

"Jesse James won't like the way we have managed it, but that won't help it any."

"He might have slipped up just as badly if he had been here."

"That he might."

"I tell you, Jim Cummins, what you ought to do. You and the other wounded man had better make for Ben Catlin's place."

"We'll probably find Jesse James and his brother there."

"Yes. And you can tell them that the rest of us have gone on to try and rescue the boys."

"All right."

"Does your arm trouble you much?"

"Not much."

"Here, let me wrap something around it."

Clell Miller took from around his neck a red bandana handkerchief which he tied around the arm of his comrade.

The party then started down the road.

At length they arrived at a point where a path turned off into the woods at the right. It was a narrow path, and seemed to have been rarely used.

"Jim Cummins, this path will take you over to Bill Catlin's place," said Clell Miller.

"Are you sure it goes by the 'long swamp'?"

"Yes."

"Then we'll try it."

Jim Cummins and the other wounded bandit turned off into the path.

The rest of the gang proceeded down the road at an easy pace. Upon turning the next bend they saw the stage coach dashing along at full speed.

"They're in a hurry," muttered Clell Miller.

The bandit then happened to glance a little farther down the road and saw a troop of horsemen.

It was the detachment of the posse that Timberlake had sent back to the aid of the stage.

The people on the stage now set up loud shouts, and seemed to be preparing to welcome the sheriff's men with a great deal of enthusiasm.

"Those passengers," said Clell Miller to the robber who rode next to him, "are great yellers when there ain't any fighting going on."

"But I don't see as there's anything the matter with their fighting," said the other.

"There is just one fighter in the whole crowd."

"You mean the one with the black beard?"

"Yes."

"He was a game one."

"Do you know who I've got a notion that fellow is?"

"Who?"

"Carl Greene!"

"What, the Chicago detective?"

"Yes—the man who has given our gang so much trouble already."

"Then our boys in the coach are in a tight place."

"Yes, but it's a long ways yet to any jail."

"Is it?"

"I mean that it's a long ways to any jail that will hold those boys."

The other burst into a laugh, and said:

"Our boys don't mind one or two nights in jail."

"They never feel bad in such cases only about one thing."

"What's that?"

"Thinking of the bother they're putting the rest of the gang to."

"You mean the bother of breaking into the jail to get them out?"

"Yes."

"You say that Wood Hite and Dick Little were stunned?"

"Yes, and Carl Haight was in a fair way of being stunned when I came away."

In the meantime, the two bandits who were just mentioned as having been stunned, had recovered consciousness. Both lay on the back seat of the coach with their hands bound, and with dazed looks in their pale faces.

At the opposite end of the conveyance lay Carl Haight, also bound and with a fierce scowl in his flushed countenance. The greater portion of the passengers were singing a chorus. They had just welcomed the sheriff's men and were in high spirits.

It was noticeable, however, that the gentleman with the black beard and the men who had aided him in the fight with the robbers did not take part in the chorus of triumph.

Nor had they joined in the loud shouts with which Timberlake's men had been welcomed.

At the end of the chorus the stranger leaned toward the one who had led in the fight with the robbers, and said:

"I should like to know who it is that we are indebted to for having saved us our valuables?"

"Call me any name you wish. White, Brown, or——"

"Or say Green."

"Yes, call me that if you wish."

"Do you like it with or without the final letter e?"

"You might put on the e if you have one to spare."

"Then you are Carl Greene, the detective?"

Carl Greene looked around the conveyance and saw that the three prisoners were waiting anxiously for his answer.

"It was reported only the other day that Carl Greene was dead," he said, watching the prisoners carefully out of the corners of his eyes.

He noticed that the three bandits seemed to regard his announcement as good news. Then still watching the fellows carefully, he added:

"But the rumor was not true."

"He is alive?"

"Yes; I am Carl Greene."

"I thought so."

There was a look of disappointment in the face of each of the three bandits when the detective announced himself.

The other passengers now insisted upon shaking hands with the famous detective who had proved of such great service to them.

A moment later the stage coach came in sight of the detachment of the posse that had been left to guard the swamp entrance, and the noisy passengers now burst into shouts, after which they still further relieved their feelings by howling out a chorus of triumph.

"What's that?" said one, pointing at the crowd that surrounded the balloon.

"It's a balloon ascension," said another.

"What place is this?" said a third, turning to the detective.

"This is Harbeck's Corners. Yes, they are getting ready for a balloon ascension."

Presently the stage drew up in front of the tavern, which was certainly the largest and most imposing building in Harbeck's Corners.

The driver called out as he drew up at the tavern:

"The stage will stop here two hours. There will be time for dinner, and all who want to can go over and watch the balloon ascension."

The detective nodded to the landlord of the tavern, when the latter appeared at the stage door and said:

"Mr. Scott, you weren't looking for me, were you?"

The landlord looked closely at the speaker, but seemed unable to recognize him.

"I wasn't looking for you, sir," said Scott, "and to tell the truth, if I had, I wouldn't have known who I was looking for."

The detective alighted and whispered something in the landlord's ear. The latter now appeared to recognize his guest, and grasping him by the hand, said:

"I didn't know you 'cause you are fixed up that way."

The detective then hurriedly informed Landlord Scott that he had secured three prisoners, and that he would like to have them locked up in the tavern during the two hours that the stage coach would remain at Harbeck's Corners. The landlord nodded his head, as much as to say that he could accommodate the detective.

"Have you got any room that will suit, Scott?"

"Yes, Carl Greene, I've got one large room without any window to it."

"The very place!" said Carl Greene.

The other passengers had now alighted, and with the assistance of two of them Carl Greene marched the three prisoners up-stairs to the room which the landlord had spoken of.

After the robbers had been ushered into this room the detective produced three pairs of handcuffs, which he proceeded to put upon the wrists of the captured outlaws. After having done this he removed the cords with which they had been bound in the first place.

"Why didn't you use the handcuffs in the coach?" asked one of the men who had assisted Carl Greene.

"I had not then come out in my true colors as a detective."

"Why hadn't you?"

"It had not seemed necessary."

"And you never represent yourself as Carl Greene, the detective, unless you find it necessary to do so?"

"Never, when I am in a disguise."

"I see."

"And if that fellow in the coach hadn't insisted that you were Carl Greene, you probably would not have discovered yourself?"

"Probably not."

The detective and his two recruits now left the room, the door of which the former carefully locked. He then placed the key in his pocket.

"I have a matter that I ought to attend to here," he said, "and if you two gentlemen will between you kindly keep an eye on this door, it will prove of great assistance to me."

"I am ready to volunteer," said one.

"And so am I," said the other.

"You can take turns about going to dinner, so that all you will lose will be the balloon ascension."

"We will be able to get along without that," said the younger of the two.

Carl Greene descended the stairs, and in the barroom ran across Sheriff Timberlake.

"I am told, sir, that Carl Greene was in the stage coach."

"I believe he was, sir."

"Then you must be Carl Greene."

"Do you feel any ways certain about it?"

"I do."

"Then you are right. But tell me, is any point of my disguise weak?"

"No; but I was told that the disguised detective wore a black beard."

"At any rate, I am glad that my disguise has proved all right."

"It has."

The sheriff then told Carl Greene that he had left four of his men to watch the road where it came out of the deep swamp.

"Then you think that the portion of the gang that drew you on are around here?" asked Carl Greene.

"We have traced them here. And they were said to be over there among the crowd."

"You mean at the balloon ascension?"

"Yes."

"And they were——"

"Undoubtedly they were Jesse James and his brother Frank."

"There can be no doubt about that, I think. Have you found any traces of them in the crowd?"

"Not yet. But my men are looking among the people."

"Who was it that told you that the James Boys were probably among the crowd?"

"The blacksmith."

"The man has a shop out there at the edge of the swamp?"

"Yes. But I had a notion that he was wrong about the James Boys having gone into the crowd."

"Well, Sheriff Timberlake, I hope that you find those two brothers, provided that——"

"Provided that what?"

"Provided I don't catch them myself."

Having said this, Carl Greene turned upon his heel and left the barrack.

He then went into the dining-room and called for something to eat.

"Anything that you have ready," he said to the waiter who attended to the table at which he sat.

While he was waiting for his order to be filled, Carl Greene said to himself:

"That blacksmith told the sheriff that the James Boys were probably in the crowd. Now, that blacksmith may have wanted to mislead the sheriff. And come to think, his shop would not be a bad place for the James Boys to have hid."

The waiter placed a large plate of roast beef and a cup of coffee before the detective. The latter proceeded to dispose of his meal in a rapid manner, and as he did so, he thought:

"The road into the deep swamp is guarded, so they won't be likely to go that way, and after they have seen the posse ride up here, they won't think of coming this way just at present. They will lie low in their hiding-place for a while longer. Yes; the blacksmith's shop is the place to look for the James Boys, and just as soon as I can get rid of this meal I will go back to that blacksmith's shop and take a good look around the place."

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE HAS BAD LUCK.

After he had finished his hasty meal, the detective arose and went out to the stable.

One of the members of the posse had just alighted from his horse, which he was directing the hostler to take the best possible care of.

"Say, my friend," said the detective, "I should like to borrow your animal for a few moments."

"I couldn't think of lending him."

"Why not?"

"Because his feet are in bad shape—he needs shoeing badly."

"I'll take him down to the blacksmith's and have him shod for you."

"Then how long will you want to use him to pay for having him shod?"

"Only a little while—say a quarter of an hour."

"The sheriff may want to start before then."

"You'll have a good excuse, won't you?"

"That's so."

"Then I will take your horse."

"But how do I know you will bring the animal back? I don't know you. I never saw you before."

"I have two hundred dollars in Landlord Scott's safe. If I don't bring back the horse——"

"I guess I can trust you to have the horse shod."

"The animal will be returned in much better shape than I took him."

Carl Greene then mounted the horse and rode in the direction of the blacksmith's shop.

He watched the place in a covert way as he approached it.

Just as he was about to turn from the road in order to enter

the shop he saw two rough-looking men emerging from the place. As he came out he heard one of them say:

"Come, lad, we must move quick or the balloon will go up without us."

"Sure," said the other, "the balloon can go up without me. I don't hanker to go up in it."

"But you want to see it go up?"

"Yes."

"Then hurry."

Carl Greene looked sharply at the two fellows, and he said to himself:

"It may be them disguised."

Then he called out to them:

"Boys, is the blacksmith in?"

"He be."

"Stop a minute. I want to talk with you."

"The balloon be goin' up, and we can't stop to talk with no one."

As he said this, the man pointed to the balloon, which was now fully inflated.

Then the pair increased their gait and hurried along in the direction of the crowd.

The detective thought:

"If I try to seize those fellows now, and they turn out not to be the James Boys, I will be simply giving the James Boys warning that I am out here looking for them. That would give them time to hurry out by the back way and make their escape."

Carl Greene gazed after the two men for a moment, and then continued his reasoning:

"But if those really are the James Boys in disguise, they will enter the crowd, where I will be able to lay my hands on them. And they won't suspect me, because I have allowed them to pass without making any real effort to stop them."

The detective rode up to the door of the blacksmith's shop and alighted.

Nick Gray looked up from his work and eyed the new-comer suspiciously.

"I want my horse shod, blacksmith," said Carl Greene, looking carefully around the place.

"I can't do it now."

"You must do it now."

"If I can't do it, I can't do it, and that's all there is about it."

"But I tell you that you can do it, and you are going to do it."

"What makes you so sure about it?"

"Because I am going to pay you double price for your work."

The blacksmith growled out something that the other could not make out, and then picking up the feet of the horse one after the other, gave them a hasty examination.

"How long since this animal was shod before?" asked Nick Gray, as he prepared to put new shoes upon the animal.

"I don't know."

"Just bought the horse?"

"No."

"Had it give to you?"

"No."

"Hired it perhaps, unless——"

"Unless I stole it, eh?"

"I didn't say that."

"Probably you thought it, though."

"If I did, what then?"

"You had a perfect right to think so if you wanted to, I suppose. It wouldn't bother you, would it, to think that you were giving a thief a lift?"

The detective went to the back door and examined the padlock which hung there.

Nick Gray looked around at him with an uneasy expression on his face.

"This is a nice padlock, blacksmith."

"Yes; pretty fair."

"How much do these come by the dozen?"

"I bought that by the one, and I forget what I paid for it at that."

The detective watched his opportunity, and taking from his pocket a little skeleton key, inserted this in the lock and turned it.

Click!

At the sound of the lock flying back in obedience to the skilful touch of the detective, Nick Gray looked around, and exclaimed:

"What was that?"

"I'll take it back, blacksmith."

"Take what back?"

"What I said about this being a nice padlock."

"Ain't it?"

"The moment I touched it it unlocked."

"Here, let me lock it again. It snaps to with a spring."

Nick Gray dropped the hoof and the tools which he had been holding, and stepped quickly forward to relock the padlock. But before he could reach the door the detective had pulled this open

In another instant Nick Gray reached the door, and, pushing it to, he replaced the padlock and snapped the lock.

But during the instant that the detective had looked out into the yard he had seen everything that it contained. Tied to a couple of the bushes he had discovered two magnificent horses.

One of these he recognized as the famous Siroc, while he had no doubt but that the other was Jim Malone.

But the detective also satisfied himself that there was nothing in the yard behind which the two bandits could have hidden themselves.

"Blacksmith, I don't wonder that you keep such fine animals as that under lock and key. The James Boys would be sure to steal those horses if they could once lay their hands on them."

"What did you want to go and open that door for?" demanded Nick Gray.

"I did it without thinking."

"Well, you had no business to look out that way and spy about my yard."

"I won't do it again."

"I don't intend you shall."

"Do you know, blacksmith, that the black horse looks just exactly like the one that Jesse James rode into the Corners on."

"No; I didn't know it, and what is more, I don't believe it."

"You don't?"

"No; I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because them horses in the back yard are plain, common horses, what's been rubbed up to look nice, and I've heerd that the James Boys keeps blooded stock."

"Ain't those horses blooded?"

Nick Gray shook his head and said:

"No; they're common horses what belongs to a couple of my friends as have gone over to see Prof. Parker go up in his balloon."

"Were the owners the two fellows that went out just as I came in?"

"No; the two fellers that you saw were here to ask me to do some iron work fer 'em. If they've got horses with 'em, they must have left 'em over to the tavern."

The detective now glanced in the direction of the stairway. As he did so, he thought:

"I must manage to search that place."

Nick Gray had resumed his shoeing.

The detective now stretched his arms over his head and gave a long yawn.

"How tired I am!" he said, "I didn't get a wink of sleep all last night."

Carl Greene then made his way to the foot of the stairway and seated himself on the bottom step.

A moment later, when Nick paused in his work, he heard the sound of slow, regular breathing. Looking in the direction of the stairs, he saw that his visitor had closed his eyes and was to all appearances asleep.

Nick Gray gazed at Carl Greene in a puzzled way, and then muttered to himself:

"He's as queer a cuss as ever I see. But I'm glad he's gone to sleep. He won't be up to any mischief now, I'm thinking."

The blacksmith resumed his work, under the impression that his troublesome patron was practically out of the way for the present.

Presently the detective partially opened his eyes and looked at Nick Gray. Then, having assured himself that the blacksmith was intent upon his work, he softly arose to his feet and quietly stole up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs he found a rough door which was ajar.

He pushed this softly open, so that the noise would not attract the attention of the blacksmith, and entered a low room, the ceiling of which had not been finished. The room was lighted by a small window at the further end. There was no one in the room.

Upon a low bed near the door, he saw two jackets and a couple of broad hats of the sombrero description.

These were just such jackets and hats as the James Boys had worn that morning.

Carl Greene examined them, and muttered:

"The James Boys have been here beyond a doubt. And they have managed to disguise themselves in this room. It was them that I passed just before I entered the shop."

The detective then went to the door, which he left in the same position as it was when he had found it, after which he crept softly down the stairs.

Seating himself where he had been when he had pretended to fall asleep, he looked at the blacksmith.

The latter was hard at work, and apparently was unconscious that his patron had just paid a visit to the upper room.

The detective pretended to sleep for a moment.

Then he suddenly rose to his feet, and, after indulging in a loud yawn, said:

"Well, blacksmith, I'll pay you for shoeing my horse now."

"Why, man, I hain't done yet," said Nick Gray, looking at him in astonishment.

"I may send some one else after the horse. But name your usual price doubled, and I will pay it."

Nick Gray named the price to which he thought that he was entitled.

"Is that your regular price, or have you doubled it as I told you to?"

"It's my regular price."

"And here is your money," said the detective, handing the blacksmith double the sum that he had named.

As the latter placed the money in his pocket, he said to the other:

"You seem to be in a big hurry to get away."

"Yes. It just come into my head that after all I'd like to see Prof. Parker go up in his balloon."

The detective now left the shop. He was followed to the door by Nick Gray, who glanced over into the field where they were getting ready for the balloon ascension. The balloon was evidently ready to go up, and nothing but its ropes, which were being held fast beneath it, seemed to prevent it from soaring into the upper air.

"You'll have to hurry if you want to get there in time," said the blacksmith.

"That's so," said the detective.

"But you don't seem to hurry."

Carl Greene was now watching the four members of the posse who had been assigned to guard the road where it entered into the deep swamp, in order to prevent the bandits from making their escape in that direction.

"You seem more taken up with them fellows," pointing to the four guards, "than you are with the balloon."

"Oh, yes, that's all right," said the detective, turning and walking rapidly in the direction of the balloon.

Nick Gray gazed for a moment after Carl Greene, and then taking out of his pocket the money which he had just received from him, he examined this carefully and said to himself:

"That's the queerest cuss I ever shoed a horse for."

Then observing Timberlake's four men, he muttered:

"Those fellows have got their eyes well fixed on the balloon. If the James Boys were here now they could dash by those chaps before they'd wake up to what was a-going on."

As the detective walked in the direction of the crowd, he thought:

"If the James Boys had only known it their best move would have been to dash by those four dummies Timberlake has set to guard the road."

As Carl Greene approached the crowd he stumbled across the man of whom he had borrowed the horse that Nick Gray was now engaged in shoeing.

"Where is my horse?" demanded the fellow.

"He is being shod over at the blacksmith's, and I have already paid the blacksmith for his work."

The man did not seem to believe this.

"Then, come along with me!" he cried, "and prove what you have said:

"I can't," replied the detective. "I have important business to attend to here."

"I say you've either got to come along now, or I'll denounce you for a horse thief."

"I can't go back with you, I say."

The other seized the detective and cried out:

"Help! Here's a horse thief!"

"You fool!" whispered Carl Greene, "you are preventing me from capturing the James Boys!"

As he said this, he tore himself free from the grasp of Timberlake's man.

The latter, however, clutched at Carl Greene and succeeded in seizing him by the beard.

This yielded and came off from the detective's face, seemingly transforming him into an entirely different person.

The shouts of Timberlake's man had attracted the attention of a number of persons in the crowd, who saw the beard snatched from Carl Greene's face.

Among these were two rough-looking men, whom the detective at a glance recognized as the fellows he had passed coming out of Nick Gray's shop.

When they saw the change in the detective's looks, caused by the loss of his beard, both of the men gave a start.

"They've recognized me!" thought Carl Greene. "And all because of this fool who doesn't know when he's well off."

A number of persons now gathered around Timberlake's man and the detective. The two fellows whom Carl Greene was satisfied were the James Boys had slunk away into the crowd upon the other side of the balloon, and were now out of sight of the man who had been tracking them.

"This fellow is a horse thief!" exclaimed Timberlake's man, addressing himself to the crowd and pointing at the detective.

The latter pointed disdainfully at his accuser, and replied:

"And that man is an idiot!"

At that moment Sheriff Timberlake came up, and, observing Carl Greene, whispered to him:

"What is up?"

In a few words the detective explained to the sheriff how the latter had falsely accused him of stealing his horse, which was now at the blacksmith shop being shod, and at no expense to its owner.

Timberlake took his man to one side and talked sharply to him for a moment. The man then turned to the crowd and said:

"It was all a mistake. The gentleman didn't take my horse after all."

The crowd seemed inclined to find fault with this announcement. They had been led to suppose that they were witnessing the capture of a horse thief, and it was disappointing to them to find that they had been deceived in the matter by Timberlake's man, whom they all agreed had played them a very mean trick.

CHAPTER VI.

A MYSTERIOUS CASE.

In the meantime, Timberlake himself held a short conversation with Carl Greene.

"Have you run across the James Boys, Carl Greene?" asked the sheriff.

"I am convinced that they are in the crowd."

"And you want to capture them yourself, I suppose, and get all the credit for it?"

"Wouldn't you, if you were in my place?"

"I suppose that I would."

"Then you don't feel disposed to find fault with me for working by myself?"

"No; but there's one thing I can't help pointing out to you."

"What is that, sheriff?"

"That is, that by not taking me into your confidence you may give the fellows a chance to escape."

"I won't do that."

"I do."

"Then you will take me into your confidence?"

"I will call on you if there seems to be any chance of the James Boys getting away."

"But won't you give me any other point to help me in finding them?"

"I will give you one point."

"What is that?"

"You had better strengthen your guard on the road where it enters the swamp."

"I have four men there."

"A couple of fellows like Jesse James and his brother could easily dash by your four men."

"Perhaps you are right. I will send a few more men to that point. I take it, then, that you think the fellows will try to escape that way?"

"It is quite likely that they will try to get away by that road, provided that——"

"Provided that what?"

"Provided that I don't catch them."

"I hope that you do, Carl Greene."

"Thank you, sheriff."

Having said this, the detective turned upon his heel and left the sheriff, who hunted up three of his men and directed them to reinforce the guards at the entrance of the swamp road.

In the meantime, the detective noticed in the field near him an old barn, under one side of which was a shed for wagons.

"I might manage," he thought, "to rig up a new disguise in there."

Prof. Parker, dressed in fairs, now appeared at the edge of the crowd and made his way toward the balloon, which was being held down by his assistants.

All eyes seemed to be fastened upon either the balloon or the aeronaut.

Carl Greene made his way quickly to the wagon shed. In the corner of this was an old covered buggy into which he got.

Taking from an inside pocket a white wig and beard, he quickly adjusted these, and then put on a rough slouch hat which he produced from another pocket.

Removing his collar and cravat, he put a silk handkerchief around his neck, and turned up the collar of his coat.

Then he removed the green spectacles from his eyes, and he had accomplished a complete transformation.

He now looked like a backwoods sporting man of the better class. He was about to spring from the buggy when he heard voices in the

barn above him. One of these voices he recognized as that passenger who had thrown cold water upon his plan for saving the money and the valuables from the robbers.

"What can that fellow be up to now?" thought Carl Greene.

The detective listened intently, and succeeded in overhearing the following conversation.

"I'm afraid to tackle the job, Mr. Todd."

"That's all nonsense," said the voice, which Carl Greene recognized as that of the doubter.

"I notice you don't want to tackle it."

"I tell you, Mr. Todd, it would be a hanging matter."

"But no one would suspect you."

"Yes, they would."

"I tell you all that you've got to do is to drop in at the house some time and say you're hungry, and offer to pay for a dinner or a supper, according to the time of day."

"I can do that."

"Then the old woman will be glad enough to give you a meal, and when you're through, offer her a dollar."

"She'll think that's too much for the meal."

"Make her take it just the same."

"Will she do it?"

"Of course she will. And then the old woman will take a liking to you, and she will tell you all about her father, who was a congressman once."

"You ask her all the questions you can think of about the congressman, and she'll bring out some newspaper extracts about the old fellow, and she'll read them to you. But there is one thing you want to be very particular about."

"And what's that?"

"To notice where she takes the extracts from."

"She might get them out of another room."

"No; she will take them out of a kind of a safe that's built in the wall."

"In the same room that they eat in?"

"Yes. You are to notice just where the extracts are taken out and put back. It will look just like an ordinary panel in the wall, only there will be a keyhole in it somewhere."

"She will carry the key?"

"Yes; she will carry it in her pocket. But you need not bother about the key. You will not need the key for what you will have to do."

"I forgot; my tool is not to be a key, it is to be a match."

"You've struck it!"

"The match?"

"No; the idea."

"But it is dangerous work setting fire to a building that folks live in."

"No one would suspect you."

"But if I were found out it would mean death."

"You wouldn't be found out."

"And the old woman might be burned to death."

"No; the son would wake up in time to save the old woman."

"What if he shouldn't?"

"It is no use putting it in that light. The son would be sure to wake up the old woman and drag her out of the house in time."

"I want certain papers in that safe to be got rid of. Why, it don't matter."

"But the safe? wouldn't that last through the fire and save the papers?"

"It's a very old safe, and was never fireproof. If the fire should get well going the safe and its contents would go in quick order."

"Do they know it isn't fireproof?"

"I do not know whether they know it or not. At any rate I do. But when you enter the house this time you must lay a few pieces of pitch pine wood on the floor right beneath the safe, and then set fire to it."

"And then hurry out?"

"You can't get out too quick. But do you agree to do it?"

"What did you say I was to receive?"

"A hundred and fifty dollars."

"When to be paid?"

"The second day after the job is done."

"Do you give me a week to do the job in?"

"Yes."

"Then I will do it for you. Where shall I meet you on the second day after the job is done?"

"I haven't quite made up my mind as to that. But you be near the coach door when it starts, and I will let you know then."

"All right."

"Now we had better mix in with the crowd again, Billings."

"All right, Mr. Todd."

The detective then heard the door of the barn, which was almost directly over his head, open. He waited a moment, and then cautiously left the shed.

He saw Mr. Todd and Billings enter the crowd. The latter was a lank youth with soft, downy whiskers and a well-freckled face.

"That Billings would be an easy man to spot anywhere," thought the detective. "This is a matter I will have to investigate. Although I have a clew, it still seems to me to be a very mysterious case."

CHAPTER VII.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

As Carl Greene approached the crowd, he saw the two rough-looking fellows, whom he believed to be the James Boys, walking rapidly in the direction of the tavern.

He followed them, walking as rapidly as he could. One of the pair glanced over his shoulder, and then whispered something to the other.

They now increased their gait almost to a run.

Carl Greene succeeded in preventing them from making any gain upon him.

A moment later he saw them enter the barroom, and he hurried toward the place. As he entered the room he looked around him, but his men were nowhere to be seen. He turned and hurried out into the road.

He then saw the pair emerge from the parlor. They took a few steps in the direction of the blacksmith's shop, and then one of them observed the detective. The man whispered something to his companion, and the pair quickly turned, and going around the further end of the tavern, they walked back rapidly in the direction of the crowd.

Carl Greene followed them.

They saw him and broke into a run.

He continued at a rapid walk, but kept his eye upon them.

A moment later they entered the crowd.

When the detective reached the edge of the throng, the fellows had disappeared, but he was confident that they were in the crowd somewhere.

"Shall I call on Timberlake?" he thought, "or shall I do the work myself?"

He thought a moment, and then clenching his teeth with a determined look, he muttered:

"I shall tend to those fellows myself!"

Prof. Parker had not yet made his ascension, although the balloon had been ready for him for some time. The crowd had now begun to show signs of impatience. The professor seemed to be very nervous.

"What's the matter with him?" demanded one.

"The balloon's ready, ain't it?" said another.

"Then why don't he go up in it?" demanded a third.

"Gentlemen," said the professor, pointing to a bank of clouds that hung in the southern sky, "those clouds have a dangerous look."

"Well, it's a dangerous business anyway, ain't it, professor? What is it we chip in our money for but to see you go through danger?"

At that moment two rough-looking men were standing near the professor's assistants, who were holding down the balloon.

One of them glanced over his shoulder and saw that a man with a white beard, who had the appearance of a backwoods sporting man of the better class, was making his way through the crowd and toward them.

"He has us," whispered the taller of the pair.

"It must be Carl Greene."

The other nodded his head.

"The crowd is full of Timberlake's men."

"Yes."

"The people around here never stood by us, so we can't count on them."

The other shook his head.

"It would do us no good that I can see to make a fight," continued the taller man.

"That's so."

"But there is one way out of the danger."

"There is? What is it?"

"Have you got plenty of nerve?"

"You ought to know I have."

The man with the white beard was getting close to them. He did not look toward them, but it was very plain to each that he had his eye upon them.

"What is the chance you spoke of?" whispered the shorter of the pair.

"Can't you see?"

"No."

"The balloon."

"Go up in it, you mean?"

"Yes."

The man with the white beard was close upon them. In another moment he would be able to lay his hand upon their shoulders.

The pair sprang forward and seized the ropes of the balloon. Then, to the astonishment of the whole crowd, they vaulted into the basket.

Prof. Parker was so overcome by astonishment at this action that he seemed for the moment to have lost the use of his limbs.

The pair drew revolvers and, pointing down at two of the assistants who held the ropes, exclaimed:

"Let go!"

These two assistants let go the ropes that they had been holding.

But three other assistants still clung to the ropes.

Two of these now saw pistols pointed at their heads by the pair who had seized the balloon, and heard themselves ordered to let go.

At that instant the man with the white beard sprang forward and, getting beneath the basket, clung to a rope that he found there.

The two assistants, who had just been covered by pistols, now obeyed the order to let go their hold.

The balloon then began to move slowly up into the air.

The last of the assistants now let go of his rope and dropped to the ground.

The balloon then rose more rapidly than before.

The white-bearded man whom the pair in the balloon had recognized as Carl Greene, still hung beneath the basket.

He had, without intending it, placed his right hand in a small noose in the rope, and this had tightened around his wrist in such a manner that he could not free himself.

As he glanced up he noticed that a piece of canvas appeared to have been tied about the rope just above where his hand had been caught.

The ground appeared to drop away from beneath him as he rose in the air.

Below him he saw the crowd standing motionless and gazing upward at the ascension which had not been promised by the owner of the balloon.

"Look, the earth is dropping away from us. It don't seem as if we were going up," said the shorter of the men in the basket.

"That's always the way it seems when you go up in a balloon," said his companion.

"I don't like looking over the side of this basket. It seems an awful ways to the ground."

"It does."

"But we have got away from them."

"Look!"

A man in the crowd had seized a rifle and was pointing it at the balloon.

A flash burst forth from the muzzle of the rifle, and a bullet rattled among the cords that hung from the side of the balloon, and by means of which the basket was suspended.

"A pretty close shave, Frank," said the taller man, who was none other than the bandit chief himself.

"Yes, Jesse," said the other, who was, of course, Jesse James' brother.

"See, the fellow is loading his rifle again!"

"It looks like Timberlake."

"I think it's him."

"Do you see Carl Greene?"

"No."

"He sprang under the balloon just as it was going to start, and seized a rope."

The other nodded his head, and said:

"I remember."

"But he must have let go the rope when the earth dropped away from us."

"You mean when we rose up into the air?"

"He must have let go unless he's hanging to that rope now, and I don't believe he is."

"Look over and see."

"I'd rather you would do that."

"All right, I will."

Having said this, Jesse James leaned his head over the side of the basket and discovered the detective with his wrist fast in the noose of the rope.

"Helloah, there, Carl Greene!"

"Helloah, Jesse James!"

Frank James now leaned his head over the side of the basket, and, looking at the detective, called out:

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm following you up."

"I should say you was."

Jesse drew his revolver and, pointing at the detective, called out:

"Let go, there!"

"My hand is tight."

"I can't help that. Let go, I say!"

With his disengaged left hand Carl Greene drew a revolver from his pocket and pointed it at the bandit chief.

Both fired.

Bang!

Bang!

The bandit's bullet tore a hole in the left sleeve of the detective's coat. The bullet of the latter severed one of the cords on the side of the balloon.

"We are over the swamp now," said Frank James.

"Yes."

"I'd like to drop the detective into the swamp."

"So would I."

"I'll tell you how we can drop Carl Greene down into the swamp," said Frank James, an instant later.

"How?"

"I will sit on your legs——"

"What good will that do?"

"It will keep you in the balloon."

"Then you mean for me to lean over and cut the rope that he is fast to?"

"Yes."

"We will try it."

Jesse James opened his knife and placed it in his teeth. Then he cocked his revolver, and said:

"Now, Frank, you can sit on my legs. And sit on them just as hard as you can."

"I will do my best," said the other.

Frank James seated himself upon the legs of his brother.

Jesse then leaned over the side of the basket and, taking his knife in his left hand, reached out to cut the rope by which the detective was suspended.

Carl Greene now raised his pistol and fired.

The bullet struck Jesse's knife and knocked it out of his hand.

The blade went whizzing through the air in the direction of the earth.

"Frank," called out Jesse, "hand me your knife. I have lost my own."

Frank produced his knife and, opening it, placed it in the left hand of Jesse.

The latter again reached out to cut the rope by which the detective was suspended.

Carl Greene had succeeded in cocking his pistol, and he again fired.

The bullet tore the left sleeve of the coat of the outlaw chief.

The latter then reached out his knife, and by a dexterous cut, severed the rope.

Carl Greene now felt himself dropping swiftly toward the earth, the rope and canvas fastened to this trailing after him.

Then with a cold, snake-like glitter in his eyes, Jesse James fired his pistol after the falling detective.

The bullet flew wide of its mark, and soon spent itself in the empty air.

Then the outlaw chief sank back into the basket of the balloon.

"Have you dropped him?" asked Frank James.

"I have."

"Will he reach the swamp alive?"

"I can't say."

"How far is he above the swamp?"

"Now, you mean?"

"I mean how far was he above the swamp when you dropped him?"

"About fifteen hundred feet."

"He must have struck by this time."

A great shout now went up from the crowd below.

"What's that?" Frank James asked.

"He must have struck the water all right."

Jesse looked over the side of the basket and cried:

"Carl Greene is all right!"

"Has he struck the water alive?" asked Frank James.

"No, he's sailing through the air all right."

"Sailing through the air?"

"Yes. There was a piece of canvas at the end of the rope. That canvas has spread and is holding him up."

"It must be a parachute."

"Then Prof. Parker was to have come down with that himself?"

"I suppose so. Some one in the crowd said something about the professor dropping out of the balloon when it was a thousand feet or so up."

"But you thought he was joking?"

"Yes."

"A flaw of wind has struck the parachute and is carrying it over toward the crowd."

"He got off lucky."

"So he did."

Another shout went up from the crowd.

"Frank, that shout seems a long way off," said the bandit chief.

"So it does."

"We are going up fast."

"Very fast."

"He has struck the ground all right, and they are crowding around him," said Jesse.

Frank now bent over the side of the basket and looked down, then he said:

"See those men running toward the hotel?"

"Yes."

"Very likely they are Timberlake's men."

"What are they hurrying to the hotel for?"

"To mount their horses and chase us."

"You don't suppose those horses of theirs can fly, do you?"

"No; they will probably keep up the road in hope of catching us when we come down."

"Are we drifting along over the road?"

"Don't you see that line right below us?"

"Yes."

"It looks just like a ribbon."

"So it does. That must be the road, though."

"Yes, and there comes the posse along the road."

"Can you make out the detective?"

"No, I can't make out any one."

"When we get too high what will we do?"

"I suppose we will have to come down again."

"But how are we going to come down?"

"Through the air."

"But I mean how are we going to start to come down?"

"That's another matter."

"But have you any idea how?"

"I haven't the slightest notion."

"Nor I."

"Besides, this looking down to the ground makes my head a little unsteady."

"So it does mine."

"Let's pull in our heads for a few minutes."

"All right."

The two bandits drew in their heads and lay down in the bottom of the basket.

"Frank," said the bandit chief, a moment later.

"Well?"

"How much higher are we going?"

"I suppose we've got to stop some time."

"I should think we ought to."

"How are we going to do it?"

"Seems to me the balloonist pulls a cord that lets out a lot of the gas from the top of the balloon."

"And that makes the balloon sink?"

"Yes."

"Let's see if this balloon hasn't got some such arrangement as that."

"It ought to have."

Jesse examined the mouth of the balloon carefully, and at length found a small, stout cord, that seemed to run up to the top.

Jesse seized the cord and prepared to give it a pull.

"Pull her for all she's worth!" exclaimed Frank James.

The bandit chief did as his brother advised.

To the astonishment of both the cord came rattling through the mouth of the balloon.

Jesse James had pulled upon it altogether too hard, and it had broken from its fastening to the valve of the balloon.

This valve had at first opened, but upon the breaking off of the cord had immediately sprung back into position.

They had now no means of opening the valve.

Jesse James examined the cord with some care, and saw that it had been broken from its fastenings.

The two bandits thought for a moment.

"I have it!" exclaimed Jesse James.

"What is it?" asked Frank James.

"Shoot a few holes in the balloon."

"That's a good idea."

"Or hit the valve."

"Better still."

Jesse James placed his revolver in the opening and reached up as far as he could into the neck of the balloon; then he blazed away.

A ripping sound was heard.

"I don't think you hit the valve," said Frank James.

"Neither do I!"

"You had better try again."

"I will."

Jesse James cocked his pistol, still holding it in the neck of the balloon, and fired a second shot.

This time there was a sound which led the bandit chief to think that he had hit something harder than oiled silk, and he cried out:

"I've hit the valve, Frank!"

"Then we ought to be going down."

"I can't see that we're moving at all."

Frank leaned his head over the side of the basket and said:

"It seems to me the earth is a good ways off yet. I can't see that we're coming down, either."

Frank James happened to lift his hat lightly. The air caught under it and it flew up above his reach. Then it seemed to shoot upward with great rapidity.

"Frank!" exclaimed the bandit chief.

"Well?"

"If we keep on going down this way we are going to strike the ground solid."

"I should judge so, from the way that hat of mine flew up."

"I say!" said Frank James, holding his ear up to the neck of the balloon: "I suppose you want to tell me that that rip is keeping up?"

"It seems to be."

Jesse James now noticed something hard in the bottom of the basket, and lying under a coil of thin, stout rope.

"What is this, I wonder?" he said.

He turned over the coil of rope and found beneath it a small steel anchor.

"Had we better throw this overboard?" asked the bandit chief.

"What is it for? Oh, it must be to catch onto trees with, or something of that sort, when you come to land," said Frank James.

"Yes; but it don't seem heavy."

"Then it won't pay to throw it out."

"Besides it may come in handy when we get close to the ground."

"There may be some use for it, but I doubt it if we keep on at this rate."

A ripping noise much louder than before was now heard by the two bandits. It seemed as if the balloon was being torn asunder.

Frank James looked upward and said:

"The balloon is going to collapse."

"Acts like it."

"What's to be done?"

"Nothing! Only sit still and take our chances."

The balloon was now almost empty of gas.

And the basket containing the two bandits was dropping toward the earth with alarming rapidity.

"Frank, it's only a question of a few minutes," said Jesse.

"A few minutes or less," replied Frank.

Frank started to look over the side, but drew back his head.

Evidently he had not the nerve to look down.

Suddenly Jesse pointed upward, and exclaimed:

"See!"

The torn silk of the empty balloon was now gathering up under the netting and was forming itself gradually into an immense parachute.

The speed of the descent had been greatly checked.

Jesse took his handkerchief from his neck and held it out.

The air lifted this up somewhat, but the motion was by no means a rapid one.

The bandits were now able to look over the sides. They found that the earth was growing more distinct, but their descent was no longer so swift as to alarm them.

"Look!" said Jesse James, pointing downward.

The other bandit looked in the direction indicated by his brother, who continued:

"You can make out the forest all right?"

"Yes."

"And that long stretch of white with dots in it?"

"Yes. That looks to me like the 'long swamp.'"

"It must be."

"And that small speck over there must be the hut of Bill Catlin."

"I'm afraid it's the other end of the swamp from Bill's."

"Do you know the hut we're going toward?"

"Yes; it's an abandoned one."

"We will be apt to strike pretty near it."

"I think so."

"If we would only strike Bill Catlin's place and smash it in on the heads of Jim Cummins and the rest of the gang that allowed the stage coach to slip through their hands."

"Yes, and to carry off some of our best men."

There was an ugly look in the eyes of the bandit chief as he said this.

"Do you think Carl Greene has gone with the men he has caught, or do you think he has joined Timberlake in hunting for us?" asked Frank James.

"I think he's hunting for us—perhaps with Timberlake, but more probably alone," replied Jesse James.

"He wants all the reward himself."

"Yes. He is niggish that way."

They were now within a few hundred yards of the ground, and it seemed likely that they would land close to the edge of the swamp.

A flaw of wind then suddenly struck the great parachute, whirling it around and finally swinging the basket into the upper branches of a tall pine tree not far from the deserted hut.

The basket was caught and held in a crotch between two branches.

The cords which held the basket snapped and the wreck of the balloon fell to the ground.

The bandits each clung to the first branch that he could lay hands upon, and both succeeded in saving themselves from falling.

"Are you all right?" asked Jesse James.

"Yes," replied the other bandit.

"I was shaken up a bit, though."

"So was I."

"We will slide down the tree and then skirt around the edge of the swamp until we reach Bill Catlin's——"

"Where we'll find the boys?"

"I hope so."

The pair started to descend, but had climbed down a few limbs only when they heard some one call out from below:

"Stop there!"

They paused in their descent, and, looking downward, saw the very man who had dropped from the balloon in the parachute.

"Carl Greene again!" muttered Jesse James.

The latter now observed that the detective held in his hands a brace of revolvers, which were pointed up at them.

"I wish, boys," said Carl Greene, "that before you come down yourselves you would drop me down your pistols."

The two bandits swung around to the side opposite to which Carl Greene stood, and drew their revolvers.

"Come, boys," said Carl Greene; "I have you at a disadvantage. You can't climb down that tree without the use of your hands, and long before you can get to the ground I will have you well covered."

Bang!

Bang!

The two bandits had answered Carl Greene's summons by blazing away at him with their revolvers.

Both bullets flew wide of the mark.

Carl Greene stepped behind a small tree a few yards back of where he had been standing, and looking up at the bandits, called out:

"Look here, Jesse James," said the detective, "you know perfectly well that you are wasting time. You have only one thing to do. That is drop your pistols and come down and surrender."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVE'S CLEVER MOVE.

Jesse James climbed a few feet higher up into the tree, and took a comfortable seat astride of a large limb. And Frank James speedily followed his example. Then, looking down at the detective, the bandit chief called out:

"It's all very well ordering us to surrender. But how are you going to take us?"

"You will soon perceive."

"Jesse," whispered Frank James to his brother.

"What?"

"He's trying to bluff us."

"I hope so; but you can never tell what trick that fellow will be up to."

"What is he up to now?"

As Frank said this the detective came out from his shelter and ran swiftly to the deserted hut.

As he reached the open doorway of this he turned around and looked up into the tree.

"He's looking to see if we are coming down," said Jesse James.

"Shall we slide down?"

"We would be just about half-way down when he got back."

"He'd get back just about in time to hold us up nicely."

"He counted on that."

"But I wonder what he's gone to the hut after?"

"Some deviltry."

"But what is it?"

"We will wait and see."

An instant later Carl Greene made his appearance at the doorway of the hut.

"What is that he's got in his hand?" asked Frank James.

The other looked carefully at Carl Greene, and said:

"He has got something, but I can't make it out."

"I see now."

"What is it?"

"It's an ax."

Carl Greene quickly made his way back to the place where he had before sheltered himself from the bullets of the bandits.

He held in his hand an ax.

It was somewhat rusty, and evidently needed some little sharpening before it could be used.

Carl Greene looked carefully around him, and at length discovered a piece of soft stone.

Picking this up, he seated himself in his former place and began to sharpen the ax. The stone was a very good one, and he was able to work with it in a satisfactory manner.

"Hello, there!" called out Jesse James.

"What do you want?" replied Carl Greene, pausing in his work.

"Are you ready to surrender?"

"No. I wanted to know what you were sharpening that ax for?"

"Are you curious about it?"

"Yes."

The detective resumed sharpening the ax, and said:

"Then I'll tell you."

"Tell ahead."

"I am sharpening this ax so that I can use it."

"I thought you were doing it for that reason. But I suppose we'll find out soon enough what you are going to use it for."

"If you are patient you will."

Presently Carl Greene seemed to be satisfied with the edge that he had succeeded in placing upon the ax, and laying down the stone, he arose.

Then he looked up into the branches of the pine tree and called out:

"Boys, you had better come down out of that tree and surrender!"

"If we refuse to come down, do you intend to cut down the tree?" demanded Jesse James.

"Yes," replied Carl Greene.

Frank James, who was now engaged in reloading the empty chambers of his revolver, whispered to his brother.

"He'll be a good mark for us if he tries to chop down the tree."

"He can't chop at the tree long," replied the other, "before one of our bullets will finish him."

Then the bandit chief cried out:

"Carl Greene, it's all nonsense to talk about your cutting down this tree!"

"Why so?"

"Won't you be working right under where we will be sitting?"

"Yes."

"And don't you suppose that one of us will manage to give you a bullet?"

"No."

"You think that we are such poor marksmen as all that comes to?"

"I don't say you are poor marksmen, but I think you won't hit me."

"Very well. If you think so, Carl Greene, go ahead and try to chop down the tree."

"I'll run the risk anyway."

"Come out then and make a target of yourself."

"I didn't say I was going to stand out and make a target of myself."

"You said the same thing."

"I did not."

"What did you say then?"

"I said that I proposed to cut down the tree."

"Then how are you going to cut down the tree without making a mark of yourself?"

"I will show you. As you ought to know there is more than one way of skinning a cat."

The detective stooped down and, reaching out, caught one of the loose cords belonging to the wrecked balloon.

By means of this he was able to drag to himself the whole of the wreck.

Then he gathered up a heap of dry sticks, together with a quantity of dry leaves, and applied a match.

Presently he had a good-sized fire burning at his feet.

A dense smoke soon rose from the fire.

The neighborhood in which the detective had been standing was now hidden from the view of the bandits.

Soon the smoke ascended as far as the branches where the pair were sitting. Frank James whispered to his brother:

"Do you suppose he expects to smoke us out?"

The bandit chief shook his head and said:

"I don't think that's his game."

"What do you think his game is?"

"He wants the smoke to hide him while he's chopping down the tree."

"Can you make out the bottom of the tree?"

"No; I can't make out anything but the smoke."

Both bandits now coughed.

"Is it getting into your eyes?" asked Frank James.

"Yes; but we will be able to stand it."

"He won't be able to smother us that way."

"The danger don't lie in the smoke."

"It is the chopping you're afraid of?"

"Yes."

The noise of the chopping could now be plainly heard by the bandits and it seemed to proceed from immediately beneath them.

"Carl Greene seems to have taken off his coat," said Jesse, as he listened to the chopping.

"We will have an awkward fall if we go down with this ax," said Frank.

"Yes; it will be hard work for us to pick the side that will strike the ground last."

Presently the sound of chopping ceased and they heard the voice of the detective in the smoke beneath them. It said:

"Now would be a good time to come down and surrender."

The bandit chief cleared his lungs as best he could of the smoke which he had been breathing in, and replied:

"And it seems to be a good time for you to rest."

"I can afford to," replied the detective.

"Why?"

"Because I've made such good progress already."

"You have got pretty well into the tree, have you?"

"Yes."

The sound of chopping was renewed.

"We might try firing at random in the smoke," said Jesse to his brother.

"All right."

Both bandits pointed downward and fired their pistols.

The chopping continued as before.

They cocked their pistols and fired again.

The chopping still continued.

"Let's give him another volley," whispered Jesse.

Again the bandits cocked their pistols and, pointing in the direction from which the sound of chopping came, again fired at random.

This shot also failed to take effect, as the chopping continued as before.

Frank placed his pistol in his belt with an exclamation of disgust and said:

"We can't wing him that way, Jesse."

"That's plain enough," said the bandit chief.

"Then what's to be done?"

"I don't know unless we come down with the tree."

The sound of chopping now ceased.

"Frank, he must have stopped to sharpen his ax."

"He finds it slow work."

"I wish he would hurry."

"You want the thing off your mind?"

"Yes."

"So do I."

A moment later the chopping was renewed.

"It don't sound as if the ax was any sharper now than it was a little while ago," said Jesse James, after listening intently for a moment.

"Then perhaps he wasn't sharpening it."

"What could he have been up to, then?"

"I don't know."

Jesse now noticed that the smoke was not quite so thick as it had been before.

"Don't you notice a difference in the smoke?" Frank James asked.

"Yes; it ain't as bad as it was," replied Jesse James.

"Why, it's growing thinner and thinner."

"So it is."

"I see what he is up to now."

"What is it?"

"Instead of sharpening his ax he was scattering the fire about."

"What was that for?"

"So as to stop the smoke. He doesn't want any more smoke."

"Why not?"

"He's cut pretty near far enough through the tree."

"So that it's about ready to fall of itself?"

"Yes, and when the tree does fall he wants it clear so that he can see where we land."

The smoke now began to clear away quite rapidly.

The bandits now saw that their theory was right. The fire had been demolished and fragments of it were scattered in every direction.

The detective now ceased chopping and retired behind the tree which had before answered as a breastwork for him.

He raised his eyes to the James brothers and called out:

"You had better come down now and surrender. It will be your last chance."

"Why?" demanded Jesse James. "Have you cut anywhere's near through the tree?"

"I have cut through it practically. In another minute it will topple over. You have just time enough to come down out of it."

"You have counted upon our surrendering, I suppose?"

"Yes; and you still have time to do so."

The tree began to sway slightly in the direction opposite to that in which the detective stood.

A loud, cracking noise was then heard.

The two bandits now sprang up higher in the branches and clung to those on the side which seemed likely to come down uppermost.

The detective seized both of his revolvers and cocked them. At that instant loud shouts were heard. The bandits looked in the direction in which the shouting had proceeded from and saw riding toward them the members of their gang.

CHAPTER IX.

CLELL MILLER'S RUSE.

Jesse James waved his arm in the direction of his men, and cried: "Just in time!"

Carl Greene had heard the shouts. He now looked in the direction from which the shouting had come and saw the bandits riding up.

He now realized that in expecting the sheriff's posse to keep the robbers cornered he had counted upon too much.

Not only had his chances of capturing the two leaders of the outlaws suddenly vanished, but he was now in great danger of being captured himself.

He did not wait to see whether Jesse James and his brother reached the ground on the upper or the under side of the tree.

Thrusting his pistols in the pockets of his coat, he turned and plunged into some high bushes, beyond which lay one of the thickest portions of the Big Blue forest.

The cracking sound continued, and the great pine, in the branches of which Jesse James and his brother clung, began to swing out of the perpendicular.

The mounted bandits looked up in astonishment at their leaders, whom they had not expected to find in so dangerous a predicament. "Stand from under!" yelled their chief.

They drew rein and, with breathless interest, watched the tall pine tree.

Crash!

The great trunk toppled over and struck the earth with a violence that made it shake beneath the feet of the horses.

In the upper branches of the tree Jesse James and his brother had been seen clinging while the tree went down.

When the great tree struck the earth Jesse James and his brother Frank disappeared from the sight of their followers.

Several of the latter sprang from their horses and pushed aside the branches of the pine.

The bandit chief and his brother were both found stunned and motionless among the branches to which they had clung.

One of the bandits took his hat, and running with this to the edge of the swamp, filled it with water. He returned and dashed the water into the faces of the unconscious men.

The latter soon began to revive.

Jesse was the first to regain consciousness.

He opened his eyes, and a look of satisfaction appeared in his face as he seemed to realize that he and his brother as well had come down with the tree in safety.

A moment later Frank opened his eyes.

"Well," said Jesse, "the James Boys managed to land right side up again this time."

"Yes," said Frank.

"Although it did knock a little wind out of our bodies."

"It was a kind of sensation of hitting something solid. It wasn't pleasant."

"No," said Jesse, rising to a sitting posture and surveying his gang.

"Well, Jim Cummins!" he said.

"Well, Jesse!" replied Jim Cummins.

"You got rather the worst of that tussle with the stage coach people."

"You see, we were taken by surprise."

Jim Cummins pointed to his left arm, which was bound up and still hung motionless by his side, and he continued:

"But we gave them something of a fight."

"I see you did."

Jim Cummins then related some of the particulars of the struggle with the passengers of the stage coach, after which he said:

"And we were a bit surprised to find you and your brother in the top of that pine tree."

"You saw the detective at the bottom of the tree, didn't you?"

"I saw some one jump into those bushes."

"It was a detective."

"Was it?"

"It was Carl Greene."

"There was a man in the coach that I took for Carl Greene. He wore a black beard."

Jesse James nodded his head and said:

"But he's changed it for a white beard since then. He's got the three boys—"

"Bill Catlin, Wood Hite and Carl Haight."

"Those seem to be the missing ones," said the bandit chief, looking around among his men. "And they're three men it will be hard to replace."

"They were took inside the coach," said Jim Cummins.

"And they were carried inside the coach as far as Harbeck's Corners, where they are now locked up in the tavern," put in the outlaw chief.

"Is there any show of getting them?" asked Jim Cummins.

"Yes; if we make tracks for Harbeck's at once."

"Carl Greene has probably headed for there!"

"Yes; and we ought to head him off."

"Can we do it?"

"I don't know. But how about your arm, Jim Cummins?"

"I can't do much in this shape, and there's another of the boys wounded in the shoulder."

Jim Cummins pointed to the other man who had been wounded in the fight with the stage coach passengers.

"You two had better lay up in the deserted hut and Frank and I will take your horses," said Jesse James.

"Where's Siroc and Jim Malone?"

"They're at Harbeck's Corners."

"You left them at Harbeck's?" said Jim Cummins, looking at his chief in astonishment.

"Yes; we left them in Nick Gray's yard. But perhaps they have been seized since then."

In a few words Jesse James told Jim Cummins of what had transpired at Harbeck's Corners, and of their trip in the balloon, and also of their adventures in the branches of the tall pine tree.

Jim Cummins and the other wounded bandit dismounted and gave their horses to Jesse and his brother, who at once mounted.

"You'll find us here," said Cummins, as he and his wounded companion made their way toward the hut.

"Wouldn't it be better to go back to Bill Catlin's?" asked the outlaw captain.

Jim Cummins shook his head.

"Catlin's ain't a safe place for us these days," he said. "Clell Miller will tell you all about it."

Clell Miller nodded his head and gave a peculiar chuckle.

Jesse and his followers now turned into the forest and soon struck an old path that Frank appeared to recognize.

"It seems to me that I remember this path," he said.

"I can't place it," said Jesse.

Frank thought a minute, and then said:

"I have it. It comes out about a mile the other side of Harbeck's Corners."

"Then," said Jesse, "it is the very path for us because then we can drop into the Corners from the direction they will least expect us."

"That will be a good move."

Clell Miller now rode forward close to his chief, and said:

"Jesse, we had something of a tussle with Timberlake over at Bill Catlin's."

"I heard the firing. Tell me all about the fight?"

"After the stage coach got away from us."

"Which it ought not to have done."

"Which it wouldn't have done if we'd had our rights. But, then, we must remember that folks don't always get their rights in this world."

"That's so."

"Well, after we'd got cheated out of our rights," continued Clell Miller, "we turned into the woods and made our way over to Bill Catlin's."

"Was Bill at home?"

"No."

"But he'd left the place in good shape?"

"Oh, yes; we found plenty to eat, and a small keg of whisky into the bargain."

"Did the boys try it?"

"Most of us did."

"You didn't overdo it?"

"Well, not at first."

"Then you started in light?"

"Yes. The boys got their cards and began to play."

"But they haven't got much money to play with just now have they?"

"No; business has got awful slack of late."

"But it will pick up."

"I hope so."

"If they didn't have money to play with, how did they manage to keep up the interest in the game?" asked Jesse James.

"We played for the drinks."

"You don't mean to say that you'd leave money for Bill Catlin for every round of drinks?"

"No."

"That would be well enough if you were anyways flush of money."

"Which we ain't."

"No," said Jesse James, emphatically.

"We'd take a drink around—that is, all but Jim Cummins and the other wounded man. And every one of us would chip in a quarter for his drink," continued Clell Miller.

"Some didn't even have a quarter, did they?"

"Those that didn't have quarters would borrow of them that had got them."

Jesse laughed and said:

"A good arrangement."

"And then we'd put the quarters into a sort of a jackpot and play for them."

"That kept up the interest?"

"Yes. And after we'd got up into the twelfth game or so some of the boys got kind of ugly."

"You ought to have knocked them down."

"I was thinking of it."

"Did any one have a run of luck?"

"Not exactly. But one of us played with a great deal of skill."

"Ah!"

"And who do you suppose it was did the skilful playing?"

"Not Clell Miller?"

The other laughed and said:

"It was Clell Miller, though; and he raked in all the money there was in the crowd."

Jesse James seemed to be very much surprised to learn this, and said:

"And the others didn't like it?"

"It wasn't at that they kicked."

"What was it they kicked about?"

"They kicked because I wouldn't lend them back the money that I'd won from them."

"Did any of them talk fight?"

"They showed fight."

"Did any of them draw on you?"

"No; I says to 'em: 'Boys, there ain't going to be any drawing in this.' I took out my pistol and laid it on the table so as to show them I wasn't afraid."

"Did that cool them down?" asked Jesse.

The other nodded his head and continued:

"Then I told them right out and out that if any of them thought they could handle me with their fists to come on."

"Did any of them take you up?"

"A few of them had got pretty well worked up by the whisky that was in them and they allowed that a right good shindy would do them good—would straighten their heads out a bit."

"They didn't all pitch on you, did they?"

"No; only one of them tackled me. The others saw that he had about got his hands full."

"They didn't want to rob him of his sport?"

"That was it. So they sailed into each other and we were having a regular old-fashioned free fight, when——"

"What happened?"

"Along came Timberlake."

"Did he ride up on you while you were at it?"

"Jim Cummins happened to see him when he was a little ways up the path."

"And he told you about it and that quieted you all down?"

"He told us that Timberlake was coming, and somehow that put an idea into my head."

"It did?"

"Yes."

"What was the idea?"

"There was an old torn coat of Bill Catlin's and an old torn hat of his a-hangin' on a peg."

"And you put them on?"

"Yes; and then there were an old pair of goggles that Bill wore when he had bad eyes."

"And you put them on?"

"Yes."

"And there you were rigged out just like Bill Catlin?"

"I was rigged out enough like Bill Catlin so that no one was likely to take me for Clell Miller."

"But Timberlake must have heard the free fight going on as he was coming up?"

"Oh, yes, he heard it. Timberlake ain't troubled with deafness, I believe."

"I am afraid not, Clell Miller."

"I says to the boys: 'Keep up the fight! Holler as loud as you know how to!'"

"What was that for?"

"Just to put Timberlake off his guard. To make him think that the gang was a party of backwoodsmen fighting among themselves."

"A good idea."

"I went to the door, but I took care to close it after me."

"And they were keeping up the free fight inside the place?"

"They were hollering and shouting for all they were worth, the boys were."

"And their pistols were lying on the table?"

"Yes, right where they could get at them if Timberlake shouldn't take my bluff."

"You played your game well, Clell."

Clell nodded his head in a way that showed that he was pleased with the compliment, and he continued:

"When Timberlake came up——"

"Timberlake wasn't alone?"

"No; there were about a dozen of his men following him, say twenty yards behind."

"He saw you?"

"Oh, yes; and he pulled in his horse. I said: 'Say, mister, there's a lot of backwoods trash in here a-poundin' on each other.'"

He sort of laughed. Then he said:

"'Did you see a balloon come down anywhere's up this way?'"

"It surprised you to hear him ask about a balloon, didn't it?" interrupted Jesse James.

"Yes; I hadn't dreamed of any balloon. But I kept my head and said 'yes.'"

"Where was it?" he asked.

"I pointed over this way and said: 'About there, I guess!'"

"Then he asked me how many men were in it and of course I did not know."

"But you made a guess?" said Jesse.

"Oh yes."

"How many did you guess?"

"Two."

"You hit it."

"Then he asked me whether the balloon came down all right, and I said it did."

"The balloon came down right enough," said Jesse, who then added: "And then he started on to look for the men that had come down in the balloon, I suppose?"

"Yes. But all this while the hollering had been going on inside, and I said to Timberlake:

"Say, mister, if some one don't come in and help me part them drunken cusses inside one on 'em will be blackening up somebody's eyes, or else, for all I know, some one will be gettin' a bloody nose."

"What did Timberlake say to that?" said Jesse.

"Oh, he laughed and said it would do them a sight of good to lose a little blood. Just then his crowd came up, and he told them that the James Boys were over this way."

"Which we were."

"You were, sure enough, though I hadn't any idea at the time that I was sending them in the right direction to find you and your brother."

"And the posse went on and left you?"

"Yes; but——"

"But they came back again?"

"Yes; but it's lucky for you that they did."

"That is so. We fired a few shots that would have guided them to where we were, and they would have lit on us at the wrong time."

"But we didn't draw them back on purpose," continued Clell Miller.

"I suppose not," said Jesse James.

"They come back all because a few of their men wanted a drink."

"How did they know you had liquor inside?"

"They had heard the boys yelling, and no doubt Timberlake had told them that there was a drunken crowd inside fighting. And they thought that likely they had got the liquor here."

"Only a few of them came back?"

"Only three of them. But you see we weren't looking for them."

"And they dropped on you suddenly?"

"The boys had all stopped fighting in fun and had gone to fighting in dead earnest to see who would be the first one to have a drink with me on the strength of having put Timberlake off his guard."

"I see."

"And I was taking off Bill Catlin's things——"

"When they dropped around?"

"Yes. They poked their horses' noses in the door before I had any idea that they had turned back, and one of them had started to ask for a drink when——"

"They recognized some of you?"

"Yes; and saw the pile of revolvers on the table."

"Then they turned about quick?"

"As quick as a flash, and rode back to Timberlake and told him what they had seen."

"Did you fire at them?"

"We hadn't time. But we knew what was coming, so we just slammed the door shut, and a few of us threw the stove over against it, so as to hold it in position."

"You were fixing for a fight?"

"That's what we were fixing for."

CHAPTER X.

OUTWITTING TIMBERLAKE.

"Where were the horses all this time?" asked the bandit chief.

"Why, don't you remember the stable at Bill Catlin's?"

"Oh, yes; it's back in that little knoll up a few hundred yards from the hut."

"Yes; and where no one could see it from the hut."

"I remember now."

"You always thought it strange, didn't you, that Bill Catlin had his stable made out there in the side of that knoll?"

"Yes, I did."

"Bill Catlin's been a boy in his day."

"No doubt about that."

"And he's been in hiding from the officers many a time."

"The chances are that he had good reasons for keeping away from those officers, Clell."

"And somehow he always managed to keep clear of them, for I have heard that he never was arrested. But we found out to-day, Jesse, how it was that Bill Catlin managed to avoid the officers so well."

"How was it?"

"I'll tell you about that when its turn comes. You want to take the story in its regular order, don't you?"

Jesse James nodded his head and said:

"Yes."

"Well, Timberlake and his crowd came back and rode toward the door."

"You were ready to meet them?"

"We were. There were a few holes in the wall and one or two chinks in the door!"

"Bill Catlin never was much at keeping his place in good order."

"Well, the holes and chinks made good places to fire through."

"And as they rode up you gave them a volley?"

"We did; and a good one."

"Did it bring down any of them?"

"No. But the bullets whistled around their ears and among their coat tails."

"That don't count, though, Clell Miller."

"It did in this case."

"You mean it drove them back?"

"They turned right around and rode back to shelter! We cocked our pistols and stood ready to give them another dose of bullets."

"We heard your firing plainly."

"You ought to; because we fired well together."

"We heard more than one volley, though."

"Yes; they rode out of cover several times; but the fire seemed to be too hot for them."

"Timberlake tried to keep his men up to their work, didn't he?" asked the bandit chief. "Ike always seems to show plenty of fight."

"Oh, yes, he showed plenty of fight; but he had men with him who didn't care at all about running up against bullets."

"Then they didn't ride up as far as the door?"

"No. But they tried to play a trick on us."

"What was it?"

"The only window in Bill Catlin's hut has a big shutter of heavy wood."

"I remember that."

"Of course we had that shutter fastened tight."

"That was the right move."

"But opposite that window there were a lot of very high bushes."

"I had forgotten that."

"Those bushes were very high, and Timberlake's men dismounted under cover and got in the bushes."

"Weren't there chinks in that side of the hut to fire through?"

"Yes. We managed to point our pistols through the chinks all right, but we hadn't anything to aim at."

"Didn't they come out into the open?"

"No. They stayed in the bushes where we couldn't see them."

"And you couldn't get a shot at them?"

"No."

"But what harm could they do you there?"

"There's where they worked their trick on us. They got a big, long, heavy piece of pine timber that it took the whole gang of them to lift."

"I see."

"And they pushed it out from the bushes. They kept themselves under cover of the bushes while they rammed the timber against the shutter."

"Of course the shutter gave way?"

"Yes. And then they fired a few shots in through the hole they had made."

"No one was fool enough to stand up before that window?"

"Of course not."

"Then what good did it do them to ram down that shutter?" asked Jesse.

"I suppose their idea was to make a hole that they could jump into," replied Clell Miller.

"But they didn't have the nerve to run up and try to jump through?"

"No. Timberlake had, but he couldn't get any one to follow him."

"Could you hear him ordering them to come on?"

"Yes; but it didn't seem to work. Pretty soon we saw that they were up to a new game."

"What was that?"

"They brought out a long piece of timber. The end of this piece was dry and had been broken off in an uneven way, so that it was very easy to set fire to."

"And they set it on fire?" asked Jesse James.

"Yes. After it had got into a good blaze they pushed it out from the bushes, standing under cover, of course, while they handled it," continued Clell Miller.

"And they pushed it into the open window?"

"Yes; they pushed it in just far enough so that the flame from it began to lick the wall of the hut. It seemed to be all day with us."

"You were in a tight corner."

"Yes."

"You couldn't have opened the door quickly and made a dash for the stable, could you?"

"The moment we had started to open the door they would have been on us."

"I suppose so."

"One of the boys happened to stumble over something just after the burning timber had been pushed into the window."

"What did he stumble over, Clell Miller?"

"He stumbled over a piece of good luck."

"In what shape was it?"

"He stumbled over an old mat that happened to lie on top of an old tub that was nearly half full of dirty water."

"Water?"

"Yes. And it didn't take us half a minute to pick up that tub and pour the water over the piece of blazing timber."

"It extinguished it, did it?"

"Immediately! And just then one of our boys called out:

"Timberlake, it would do you no good to set this place on fire again, 'cause we got a hustling fire department here!"

Jesse James laughed heartily.

"And then," continued Clell Miller, "our boys set up a laugh that must have made Sheriff Timberlake and his men feel sick."

"But you weren't out of the woods yet?"

"Not by any means. Timberlake's men left the piece of timber sticking in our window, and then everything seemed to be quiet over in the bushes."

"They hadn't gone away?"

"No. They were planning some more mischief, I suppose."

"What was it?"

"I don't know, because very soon after that we came away."

"You came away?" repeated Jesse James, looking at Clell Miller in astonishment.

"Yes."

"I thought you said that Timberlake's men were watching the door?"

"So they were."

"And you said that they would have been on you the moment you had left the door."

"So they would."

"Then you didn't leave by the door?"

"No."

"Then how did you leave?" demanded Jesse James, with a puzzled look.

Clell Miller seemed to enjoy the perplexity of his chief.

"Will you please tell me?" continued Jesse James. "How did you get away?"

"We got away through the floor."

"Through the floor?" repeated Jesse.

"Yes."

"How was that?"

"I said a little while ago that we had discovered how it was that Bill Catlin always managed to get away from the officers."

"Yes. And you promised to explain it."

"It happened that one of the boys stepped a little bit heavy on a certain spot in the floor of the hut, and it gave way with him."

"Was it a hidden trap-door?"

"Yes."

"And it opened into a passageway, didn't it?"

"It was right over what proved to be the mouth of a cave."

"A cave?"

"Yes; and the fellow that the trap gave way under dropped into

the entrance to the cave. He wasn't much hurt, and he managed to climb back to the trap, where several of us were watching for him."

"Then I suppose it occurred to you that the cave might lead somewhere?"

"It was the opinion of all of us that if we followed the cave it would bring us out of our fix."

"Bill Catlin must have known what he was about when he built that trap," said Jesse James.

"He did. Well, I offered to explore the cave first, so I picked up a long pine stick that lay in one corner of the hut."

"Pine makes a good torch."

"I climbed down through the trap, and then I lit the torch. By its light I followed the entrance, which led down into the main cave, which I found was perhaps a dozen feet high and of about the same width."

"About how long was it?"

"Several hundred yards, I should say."

"I have a notion that I know about where that cave came out."

"It came out just where we wanted it to. At the end of the further entrance I found a trap that opened into the stable where we had left our horses."

"Then that was the way Bill Catlin worked it?"

"Yes."

"You returned through the cave, I suppose, and told the boys what you had discovered?"

"Yes; and we all climbed down into the cave entrance and closed the trap-door after us as carefully as we could. It was well set into the floor."

"Oh, Bill Catlin isn't the man to build a trap-door that every one will see."

"We made our way up into the stable; and I climbed up on top of the mound, and I could make out the heads of the sheriff and his men over in the bushes. Then I climbed down, and we walked our horses out of the stable one by one and as quietly as we could."

"And you mounted when you got well under cover?"

"Yes."

"Well, Clell, you outwitted Sheriff Timberlake in great style. You're a credit to the gang."

CHAPTER XI.

A SURPRISE.

"You heard us firing after you left the stable, didn't you, Clell?" continued the bandit chief.

"Yes; we were about half way from Bill Catlin's hut to where you were when we heard it! Some of the boys said that the firing was back at Catlin's—that Timberlake's men were making a rush for the hut, thinking that we were inside."

"But the sound came from this direction, didn't it?"

"But some of the boys said that the echo was deceiving. But I knew very well that the shooting came from this way."

"Did you see any smoke?"

"Yes; I saw the smoke and pointed it out to the boys, and that convinced some of them."

"Clell Miller," said Jesse James, suddenly reining in his horse.

"What is it?" said the other, also pulling up.

"Timberlake's men must have seen the smoke coming from the fire that the detective built."

"Very likely he did."

"And when he discovers, as he will sooner or later, that the boys have stolen a march on him and escaped, he will come up to where he saw the smoke. He couldn't be so sure about the direction that the firing was in."

"But he could be sure of the smoke."

"Yes."

"And that would fetch him up to where you were treed."

"Yes," said the outlaw chief; "but the point is that when he gets up there he will see the deserted hut where our wounded men are."

"And will search it?"

"Yes."

"We ought to have thought of that before, Jesse. It's a wonder that Jim Cummins didn't happen to think of the danger himself."

"Jim Cummins was pretty well played out along with his wounded arm. He wasn't in a shape to count the chances very carefully."

"That is so."

The other bandits had also reined in their horses.

"I have it," said Jesse.

"What is it?" asked Clell.

"This path ain't a continuation of the one that runs along the side of the swamp from Bill Catlin's to the deserted hut, is it?"

Clell Miller thought a moment, and then said:

"No. We are nearer to Catlin's now than we are to the deserted hut. This path branches off from the other."

"Then we will build a big fire here, and Timberlake will be likely to come this way instead of going to the deserted hut when he finds out that you have escaped."

"That is so."

Clell Miller and two or three of the other robbers dismounted, and quickly got together a heap of dry wood, over which they placed a quantity of damp leaves.

They lit the wood, which blazed up rapidly, while the leaves sent up a thick smoke.

After satisfying himself that the fire was likely to last for some time, Clell Miller heaped quantities of damp leaves around the edges of the burning pile.

"They will catch slowly," he said, "and will be sure to burn long enough to be seen by some one in Timberlake's gang."

Clell Miller and the other outlaw now mounted, and the whole party started up again.

"Frank," said the outlaw chief, after they had ridden about a mile in silence.

"What?"

"Ain't we a little bit short-handed?"

"What with two men laid up in the hospital and three more prisoners, we don't muster quite as strong as we ought, that is, to ride into Harbeck's Corners in proper shape."

"Had we better ride into the Corners by daylight, or wait until after dark?" asked Jesse James.

"I think we had better wait until after dark."

"But then, Carl Greene will be there ahead of us, and will arouse the whole town—you know that the people at Harbeck's Corners ain't over-friendly."

"I understand that; but, at the same time, we ain't in any shape to ride into Harbeck's Corners by daylight."

Frank said this in a very decided manner.

"I wonder if Carl Greene has started on with our three men?" said Jesse.

"The stage-coach must have gone long ago. I am pretty sure that the boys are still locked up in the tavern."

"I guess you are right about that."

"If Carl Greene could get a good team at Harbeck's Corners, the chances are that he would go right on down the road with the men."

"Yes," said Jesse James, "and in that case we could attack him and rescue the men. This path brings up on the highway the other side of Harbeck's Corners, I believe that you said?"

"Yes; about a mile the other side."

"Then we'll lay for Carl Greene at the point where this path turns into the road."

"That will be our best move."

The bandits rode on in silence, and at length came upon a road.

"That can't be the main highway, can it?" said Jesse.

"No. This is the road that runs off at right angles just beyond the tavern," said Frank.

"I remember it now."

"Most of the people who went to the balloon ascension came from up this way."

"I suppose so."

"But pretty much all of them have gone back home by this time."

"I suppose a few have hung around the Corners to drink," said Jesse.

"A few."

Clell Miller now had a suggestion to make. He said:

"How would it do to stop here and hold up a few of them as they come along?"

Jesse shook his head.

"I don't think it would pay, Clell."

Frank now drew in rein. His brother pulled up and looked at him inquiringly.

"What's the matter, Frank?" asked the bandit chief.

"I was thinking that we might stop a few of them and ask them how they were pleased with our performance to-day."

"We might do that. They ought to have been pleased with the show."

"Yes. The James Brothers and Carl Greene don't generally show together that way."

"It was well worth the price."

"But the worst of it was that the price all went to Prof. Parker."

"That's so."

"While we did all the work."

"It's a shame," cried Clell Miller, who added: "I wonder if the professor will come this way?"

Frank nodded his head and said:

"Most likely he came down to Harbeck's Corners this way, and he will be apt to go away by this road."

"We ought to have the receipts of the performance," said Jesse James, who continued:

"Frank, you and Clell might stop here a while while we have the chance of being able to hold up Prof. Parker."

"How many men would that leave you?"

"That would only leave me four men. But with that many I will tackle Carl Greene if he should come along with our boys."

"Carl Greene never takes much of an escort when he carries off his prisoners."

"No; he does not," said Jesse James.

"Then Clell and I will wait here a few minutes."

"Some one is likely to come along soon who can tell you whether the professor has started off yet with our gate money."

"And he could also tell us whether Carl Greene had returned to Harbeck's Corners when he left."

"That's so," said Jesse, who crossed the road, followed by his four men, and proceeded along the path which led toward the main highway.

In the meantime Frank James and Clell Miller rode back a few rods into the woods and found a point from which they could command a view of the road in the direction of Harbeck's Corners.

"Frank," said Clell, "have you any notion that you will be able to get our horses back?"

"I'd feel very badly cut up if I didn't think I was going to have Jim Malone again."

It was very plain that Frank meant what he said.

"And I suppose that your brother would be pretty well broke up if he didn't think he was going to have Siroc back?" said Clell Miller.

"Of course he would be."

"Very likely Carl Greene will seize the horses."

"Very likely he has done so already. But then he won't harm them."

"They are only prisoners, like Wood Hite and Dick Little and Carl Haight."

"Yes; but the horses ain't guarded nearly as close as the boys are."

"So the horses will be the easiest to get back."

"I think so."

"And I'm pretty sure, Frank, that we'll manage to get back the boys and the horses both before we're twenty-four hours older."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Frank.

"What is that?" said Clell, pointing down the road.

"It's a countryman on horseback," replied Frank.

"We'll hold him up, then."

"Yes; we'll hold him up for information, and if he has any money——"

"Why, we'll hold him up for that, too."

"Yes."

It was a rough-looking backwoodsman who rode up. He was seated astride of a horse whose bones seemed to protrude through its hide, which was as rough of appearance as was the man himself.

"He looks like a man that you can't fool much with," whispered Frank James, "unless you keep him well covered."

Clell eyed the man critically, and then said:

"He looks to me as if he had quite a little fight in him. But you do the talking with him, and I'll watch him carefully."

"I ain't afraid of him," said Frank.

"No; of course not. But he looks a bit dull, and you may have your hands full in getting something out of him."

Frank smiled and said:

"And you think it may take up all my time getting a little information out of him?"

"I think it likely."

"All right, then. We'll work on that plan. You watch him, and I'll pump him."

Frank and Clell now rode out to the edge of the road and waited for the countryman to come up.

"We had better play off countrymen," whispered Frank to his companion.

"All right," said Clell.

The countryman now glanced up and observed the two bandits by the roadside. He eyed them rather suspiciously, but did not pull in his horse.

As he drew near the two robbers he looked straight ahead of him, as if he intended to pass them without saying anything.

Frank James called out:

"I say, neighbor!"

The countryman turned his head toward the speaker and then pulled in his horse.

"Was it you," he asked Frank, "who said neighbor to me?"

Frank nodded his head and replied:

"Yes."

"And what for did you say neighbor to me?"

"I wanted to be kinder polite."

"Perlite, eh?"

"Yes. Don't you like folks to be polite to you?"

"We ain't none on us perlite up our way. Perliteness don't seem for to pay."

"It don't pay in some cases, that's so," said Frank.

"And this be one of them cases! So I don't want no strangers a-callin' me neighbor."

"What shall I call you, then?"

"Call me stranger; or you ken call me anything else you darned please except neighbor."

"Well, then, stranger, I should like to ask you if you went to that 'ere balloon ascension?"

"You want to know something about that 'ere ascension of Prof. Parker, eh?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to know real bad, young feller?"

"Yes."

The countryman took from his pocket a plug of tobacco, from the corner of which he bit off a large chunk. Then replacing the plug in his pocket he thought for a moment.

At length he looked up at Frank and said:

"Young man, I've got my doubts as to whether 'twould be right in me for to encourage your curiosity."

"Stranger, we don't mind paying you a little for tellin' us about it."

The countryman looked at the speaker in astonishment and then exclaimed:

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course we do," replied Frank, who then turned to Clell and said:

"Lend me a half dollar, Dick."

The face of the countryman lighted up at the mention of "half dollar."

Clell Miller produced a half dollar, which he tossed to Frank.

The latter held up the coin to the countryman and said:

"Tell us about the balloon ascension and I'll give you this."

The fellow eagerly reached out his hand and Frank tossed the half dollar to him.

He grasped the coin, and after biting it to make sure that it was a good one, he placed it in his pocket and said:

"That 'ere balloon ascension was a cute thing, I tell you."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that Prof. Parker knows a thing or two."

"He went up all right, then?"

"No; he didn't go up."

"Wasn't there any ascension after all?"

"Yes; it was this way: Prof. Parker hired a couple of areanaughts, or whatever you call 'em, to dress up like rough crackers from up country. Why," pointing to Frank James, "one on 'em was fixed up a little bit the way you are."

"You don't tell me?"

"Yes. And there was another dressed-up areanaught that took a hand."

"What did he do?"

"The first two, they jumped in the basket and drew pistols and pretended to frighten the folks into lettin' go of the balloon ropes. And the third areanaught, he grabbed hold of the pareashute that hung from in under the balloon."

"This was all a put-up job, you say?"

"Yes. And up they went into the air. And the man in the pareashute got fired at and he fired back, and then the two men in the basket cut the pareashute loose, and it kim sailing down nice."

"And he landed all right?"

"Yes. But the best of the joke was that there was the sheriff and his posse in the crowd looking for the James Boys."

"The robbers?"

"Yes; and some one told the sheriff just for a lark that it was the two James Boys that was in the basket, and that it was a detective that had hung on to the pareashute what they cut loose from under 'em."

"And the sheriff believed it?"

"Yes. And he went up the road lookin' for the robbers to come down. It was a joke, I tell you."

The two bandits both laughed at the account of the ascent which the countryman had given them.

"And then," continued the countryman, "the professor, he told the crowd that it had cost him a good deal of money to get up the surprise——"

"Did the professor call it a surprise?"

"That's what he called it. And he asked the crowd to chip in something extra to cover the extra cost."

"And did the people chip in?"

"They chipped in heavy."

"Clell Miller," whispered Frank James to his companion, "that Prof. Parker is a smart man."

"Yes," replied Clell Miller; "he's given us a surprise. The crowd didn't have the surprise all to themselves."

CHAPTER XII.

CARL GREENE SQUARES AN ACCOUNT.

Turning again to the countryman, Frank said:

"The professor lost his balloon, didn't he?"

"No."

"He didn't lose his balloon?"

"Not exactly. You see it hain't a loss in the money line, 'cause it was an old one, and he didn't mean for to use it again."

"Then, after the dropping act was done, he just let it go and didn't try to hunt it up."

"Yes."

"Had the professor left Harbeck's Corners when you came away from there?"

"No," said the countryman. "but he was just getting ready to leave when I came away. I was kinder surprised that he didn't ketch up with me afore this. I've been lookin' fer him every minute."

"Thank you, stranger, for what you've told us 'bout that ascension," said Frank.

"It was a fine one and no——."

"We won't keep you any longer, stranger."

"Don't bother 'bout that. You've give me half a dollar and I'm ready to talk all night about them 'ere balloon doings."

"But we've heard enough, stranger."

"Say, young man, I've started in on that 'ere subject, and I don't propose to stop it till I get darned good and ready."

"You don't?" demanded Frank.

"No, I don't," said the countryman, angrily.

"Then I want you to get darned good and ready right now!"

As he said this Frank drew his revolver. Clell Miller also drew his pistol.

The countryman now saw two pistols leveled at his head. His angry look instantly deserted him.

"What are you doin' that fer?" he asked, in a frightened tone.

"All you've got to do is to get right up the road, but get up just as quick as ever that old nag of yours will let you."

Frank James said this in a tone which showed plainly that he was not to be trifled with.

"You bet I'll get!" exclaimed the countryman, digging his heels into the sides of his horse.

The latter broke into a gallop and hurried up the road, its rider looking back over his shoulder every few seconds in order to make sure that he was not being pursued.

A moment later he turned a bend in the road and disappeared from the view of the bandits.

"As soon as he said that Prof. Parker was likely to come up soon," said Frank to his companion, when the countryman had disappeared, "I saw that we didn't want the cuss around any longer."

"We got rid of him in short order."

"That we did."

"The professor ought to be along pretty soon."

"Yes. Unless he's made up his mind to disappoint this audience that is waiting for him here."

"He knew what he was about when he saw his balloon go up."

"Yes. He lost no time in turning the thing to his own account. Just imagine his claiming that we were his assistants!"

"That man has got a nerve."

"He has. And I've got a notion that he'd do well at our business."

"Isn't that him coming?"

Clell Miller pointed down the road.

A light truck drawn by two horses and with two men in the driver's seat, was now seen coming up the road.

"That's the professor," said Frank James.

The two bandits waited by the roadside and watched the approaching truck.

It evidently contained all of the material necessary for a balloon ascension.

The professor had left the driving to his assistant, and was leaning back in his seat and enjoying a cigar.

There was a look of deep satisfaction on the professor's face. Evidently he was proud of the little game which he had played that afternoon upon his rustic audience. Presently the driver called his attention to the fact that there were two horsemen on the roadside ahead of them.

The professor looked up at the two bandits, whom he eyed carefully. Evidently he was not satisfied with their appearance. He whispered to the driver, who whipped up his horses.

Frank James and Clell Miller now rode boldly out into the middle of the road.

The driver then pulled in his horses and the truck came to a standstill.

The two bandits now came up to the truck.

"Prof. Parker!" called out Frank James.

"That is me," said the balloonist.

"May I ask if you have made any arrangements for the transportation of your assistants?"

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't two of your assistants go up in a balloon over at Harbeck's Corners?"

"Yes."

"Did they come down all right?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure that they did?"

"I have every reason to believe that they did."

"But you are not quite positive that they landed in safety?"

"No; I am not positive."

"Why, didn't you wait at the corners and give them a chance to catch up?"

"They know how to take care of themselves. They will show up all right at the next place where we are to give an ascension."

"But haven't they got to lug that heavy basket and balloon to where they are going?"

The professor shook his head and said:

"No. It was an old balloon that was to have been abandoned. In fact, they had orders not to look after it."

"You gave them those orders, did you, professor?"

"Yes."

"That's a lie, professor!"

Prof. Parker looked up in surprise at the person who had addressed him in this manner, and he now recognized one of the men who had gone up in the basket of his balloon.

"Prof. Parker," continued Frank James, "you were intending to run away without paying your assistants for their services. You did not mean that they should have a single cent of the money that they had earned for you."

"Very well," said the professor, "I didn't mean that they should have any of the money. And why should they? They got out of a big scrape by going up in the balloon just as they did."

"How do you know that?"

"They were chased by the sheriff's posse and by the detectives at the time."

"Do you know who they were?"

"I guess they were the James Boys."

"You made a pretty good thing out of the ascension, didn't you, Prof. Parker?"

"The crowd chipped in something——"

"They chipped in twice, didn't they?"

"Yes."

"How much did you take in altogether?"

"Enough to pay all that I owed to a man named Carpenter, who is stopping at the tavern at Harbeck's Corners. I came near busting up at the last place I showed, and I had to borrow a hundred and twenty dollars of Carpenter."

"And he came on here to get his money back?"

"That was what he did."

"Did you have any money left over after paying Carpenter what you owed him?"

"I had three or four dollars left, perhaps."

"And no more?"

"That was all. But why do you ask?"

"I thought a minute ago that you seemed to recognize me as one of the men that went up in your balloon for you."

"I thought you looked like one of them."

"I am one of them."

"Then you came down all right?"

"I look like it, don't I?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, I want my pay and the pay of my partner!"

"I didn't agree to give you any pay!"

"That doesn't make any difference. We earned pay and big pay at that. There you were afraid to go up in your balloon for fear of the whirlwind! Then we stepped in and took the dangerous job off your hands."

"But I didn't ask you to take it off my hands!" said the professor. Frank James paid no attention to this protest, but continued:

"The crowd was just going to have back what it had given you in the first place when we stepped in and saved your reputation for you."

The professor bit his lip, and after hesitating a moment, said:

"How much did you expect for your services, and for those of your comrade?"

"We ought to have what the people chipped in the first time, because the crowd would have taken it away from you if we had not come forward and gone up with the balloon."

"Do you really think that you ought to have all that?"

"We ought to have that to begin with! And then what the people chipped in the second time was given for the additional expense of giving the crowd the surprise! Nothing could be fairer, then, than

to turn over that money to us, because the crowd intended it for us! You understand that as well as we do."

The professor gazed at Frank James in amazement for a moment, and then said:

"Is there anything more that you want?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"We want a good, round sum from you for saving your reputation."

Frank James and Clell Miller then drew their revolvers and pointed them at Prof. Parker's head.

"Professor," said Frank James, "hands up!"

The professor lifted his hands and then said:

"But I told you that Carpenter cleaned me out—took all of my money except three or four dollars."

"Professor, just step down off that truck, and keep your hands up while you are doing it."

Prof. Parker alighted from the truck, still holding up his hands.

"Clell, keep this man well covered while I collect our little bill of him!" said Frank, alighting from his horse.

He proceeded to look among the contents of the truck. He continued to search for several minutes without finding what he was looking for.

At length he ran upon a small tub which contained, among other things, several bags of ballast.

He pulled aside the bags and discovered under these a cigar box. He opened this and found that it was nearly filled with silver coins, from among which he picked out a roll of bills, nearly all of which were of the one and two dollar denominations.

"Aha!" said Frank James, "I have discovered the box office! You had a little money left over, professor, after you squared your accounts with Carpenter."

Frank then made a hurried estimate of the contents of the cigar-box.

"Clell!" he called out, "we will get for this ascension of ours at Harbeck's Corners in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty dollars! And Jesse and I have earned it—every cent of it!"

Clell Miller did not make any reply to this.

When the time arrived at which he naturally would have said something, Frank heard, instead of Clell's voice, the sound of something falling to the ground.

Frank looked up and saw his comrade lying senseless upon the ground.

And within a few yards of Clell Miller he saw a man with a white beard pointing a revolver at his head.

It was Carl Greene, who had come up while he was searching the truck, and who had stolen up behind Clell Miller and had hit that bandit a well-directed blow upon the back of the head with a knotted stick which he had found by the wayside.

"Hands up!" cried Carl Greene.

Frank James ground his teeth angrily together; but there seemed to be no help for it.

Up went the bandit's hands, and Carl Greene at once relieved him of his pistol.

"What have you got there?" said the detective, stepping forward and picking up the cigar-box.

The professor explained that this was the money which Frank James had been about to rob him of, and which the bandit had put in a claim for upon the strength that he and his brother had earned it by going up in the balloon.

"Well, professor," said Carl Greene, "if I remember rightly, I had a hand in that ascension."

"You did," replied the professor, who had recognized Carl Greene as the man who had come down with the parachute.

"And, as every one knows, the drawing card of a balloon ascension is the parachute descent. Now, who came down in the parachute?"

"You did."

"I was the one who ran the greatest risk, and who made the thing a success!"

"You were!" exclaimed the professor.

"Then this money ought to go to me. In fact, I demand it as my fee for doing the parachute act."

The professor drew rather a long face.

"But," continued Carl Greene, "I am not going to overlook the fact that, although I earned this money fairly, the professor here is entitled to something for letting me have the use of his parachute with which I did the act, and also for the use of the balloon——"

"And also for the cost and labor of filling the balloon with gas," put in the professor, who now wore a much more cheerful expression.

"Of course the filling of the balloon is considered in the rent," said Carl Greene. "And, taking everything into consideration, I think it is no more than fair that the professor should have a good sum by way of rent. I think this about the right amount."

As he said this Greene handed the box to the professor; then he continued:

"Professor, will you and your man help me to tie these rascals to the horses? You ought to have a little cord with you."

Prof. Parker placed his recovered box-office receipts under the driver's seat, and produced a cord which, under Carl Greene's direction, he cut into short lengths. The detective then bound Frank James, and placing him upon one of the horses, tied him there in as secure a manner as possible.

Clell Miller had now begun to show signs of returning consciousness. He was also bound and was made fast to the other horse.

"Now, professor," said the detective, "you can go on your way."

The professor and his driver now mounted their seats and prepared to start.

"I don't think, professor, that at the next place you show quite so much stray talent will come forward and offer its services."

"Probably not," said the professor. "But where are you going with your prisoners?"

"Back to Harbeck's Corners, where I have another lot of them."

"Oh, yes; I remember hearing something about it; but I was so busy——"

"Yes, I see; you had your hands full in getting the balloon ready for us."

"Good-by, Mr. Detective," said the professor, as his driver started up the horses. "You've made a lot of money for me, and what is more, you have saved it from being taken away from me again."

The detective waved his hand toward the professor, and then taking the two horses by their bridles, started with his prisoners for Harbeck's Corners.

On his way to that place he passed several parties who were returning home from the ascension, and who had evidently tarried late at the tavern.

The people manifested great astonishment at the sight of the two bound robbers being led back to Harbeck's Corners by the man who had that very day caused their hair to stand upon end by his terrific feat with the parachute.

Great was the commotion when the detective arrived at Harbeck's Corners with his prisoners.

Landlord Scott appeared at his door as Carl Greene drew up the horses in front of the tavern.

"You see, landlord, that I have brought some more guests for you," said the detective.

"I see you have, detective."

"Can you accommodate them?"

"I guess I can find accommodations for them up in the big room where I put the others."

"The others are there all safe, ain't they?"

"I believe they are."

"I suppose that the two passengers who watched them at first have gone on with the stage-coach?"

"Yes; they said they couldn't stay any longer."

"I supposed that they would have to go on with the stage."

"But when you left them in charge you expected to return pretty soon, didn't you?"

"I hadn't any idea then of making the ascension, although I hoped to get one of these fellows."

"Ain't they the two fellows that went up with you?"

"No; only one of them."

A crowd had now gathered around the front of the tavern, and were watching the prisoners.

Carl Greene asked the landlord to assist him up-stairs with the two bandits.

The latter were unfastened from the horses and were assisted to alight. They were then led upstairs to the room where Carl Greene had left their comrades a few hours before. The detective took the key of the room from his pocket and unlocked the door. The three prisoners inside the room were greatly astonished at the appearance of two of their comrades.

Carl Greene, after ushering the two new prisoners into the apartment, examined the lock to see if it had been tampered with in any way during his absence. There was nothing, however, to indicate that the men had tried to escape from the place.

Carl Greene and the landlord had left the room, the former locking the door after him.

"If you keep on this way, Mr. Detective," said Landlord Scott, "you will soon have my house full."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BARGAIN—FOLLOWING UP BILLINGS.

As the detective and Landlord Scott descended the stairs, the latter said:

"How do you expect to get your prisoners to jail?"

"Oh, I will take them down the road until I get opposite to Lexington. Then I will try the ferry across the river."

"But I don't know when there will be another stage down this road."

"The stages don't come regularly by this road now. I've been told."

"They do not."

"But I have it on very good authority that there will be an extra stage along to-morrow, with a mounted escort carrying Winchester."

"The robbers won't touch that."

"No; they won't bother with that stage."

"And that's the one you will take your prisoners by?"

"I expect to—that is, if I can hold them until the stage comes along."

"I guess you can do that. Pretty much all of Harbeck's Corners will stand by you. The folks around here don't like the James Boys."

"You are sure of the people of the place?"

"I am sure of them all but one, and he can't do much for the robbers."

"I guess I know who you mean, landlord."

"Who is it?"

"Nick Gray, the blacksmith."

"You are right. But how did you come to find that out?"

Carl Greene then told Scott of his having found the two horses in the yard of the blacksmith's place. Then he said:

"I can count on the men of Harbeck's Corners to stand guard around the tavern to-night, you think?"

"I am sure you can."

"The gang of robbers has become pretty short-handed, and we needn't fear much from them."

"You've got five of them prisoners?"

"Yes; and two more are wounded, so that they won't be of much good just at present. And that leaves only four men besides Jesse James."

"We ought to be able to drive back those five men," said the landlord, in a confident manner.

"It isn't any open attack that I fear. But Jesse James, you know, is a long-headed man."

"So I've been told."

"But we'll see what we can do to prevent any attack of his," said the detective.

By this time they had reached the barroom.

"I'll take up the thing with the men," said the landlord, "and I'll arrange to have a guard ready by nightfall."

"All right, landlord; and while I think of it, I'll change myself a little bit."

"I see. You want to take off your last disguise. I didn't believe at first it could be you when you landed from that parachute."

The landlord led the way to his own room, which was on the same floor of the house.

Here Carl Greene removed his white beard and wig and put on a standing collar and cravat.

This made a decided change in his appearance.

Then he left the tavern and made his way in the direction of Nick Gray's blacksmith shop.

When he arrived at the shop, Carl Greene found the door locked.

"I don't like this," thought the detective. "It is plain that Nick has gone somewhere or other to communicate with the robbers."

The detective made his way around to the bushes that closed in the back yard of the place.

He forced his way through the bushes and entered the yard.

Siroc and Jim Malone were no longer there.

"The worst of it is," thought the detective, "that Nick has taken the horses. He has probably carried the animals to some point where they had agreed to meet, or else to one of the stables which the gang use, and where they'll be sure to find them."

He tried the back door of the shop, and found that this was locked on the inside, probably by the padlock which he had seen when he was at the shop before.

"I had counted on having those horses as a sort of an attraction for the rest of the gang. They might have come back after them, and I could have caught, say a couple more of them, and, perhaps, Jesse himself! Then I would have had a fine crowd to carry on to the Lexington jail."

The detective now looked carefully along the planking of the door. He at length found a small place that appeared to have been recently put into the door, although it was painted the same color as the rest of the wood.

"This looks something like a trap-door."

He gave it a push, and it slowly yielded at the top. Then he discovered that it was a trap-door which was supplied with a spring at the bottom, and that could be opened either from the inside or the outside of the place.

"Nick Gray is certainly a very clever man. He knows how to go in and out of his place quietly."

Carl Greene entered the shop, and looked carefully around the

place. Then he ascended the stairs and looked into the room where he had before seen the jackets and hats that the James boys had left there when they put on their disguises.

He looked through the pockets of the jackets, thinking that he might possibly find here some papers which might reveal plans which the bandits had proposed to carry out at some future time.

"They don't map out their work on paper much, I guess," thought the detective, as he replaced the jackets where he had found them.

He then made his way to the stairs, intending to leave the place at once.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs, however, he heard some one unlocking the front door of the shop.

Carl Greene paused and listened.

He heard what he took to be two persons entering the shop. Then he recognized the voice of Nick Gray.

"I had to go away with a couple of horses that belonged to some friends of mine," said Nick Gray.

"What did you do with the horses?" asked another voice, which struck the detective as being familiar.

The blacksmith laughed, and said:

"Oh, I put 'em in a place where they'd be safe."

"Was they stolen horses?"

"You want to know too much, Billings."

The detective now remembered that the man who had the conversation with Todd in the barn, under which he had put on his last disguise, had been called Billings.

"I ain't so curious as you think, Nick Gray," said the other, whose voice the detective now recognized as that of the man whom he had heard plotting with Todd.

"I don't care to tell you, Billings, where I did take those horses."

"Then I don't want to know."

"But what is it you say that you want of me?"

"And that I'm going to pay you for."

"That is it, I reckon."

"All you've got to do is to notice the first night when it thunders and lightens any ways hard."

"Is that all?"

"That's the biggest part of what you've got to do, and what you'll be paid fer."

"That's easy."

"And the other part's just as easy."

"What's that?"

"You've got to swear through thick and thin that the night of that thunder and lightnin', Billings came along and stopped at your house."

"I'm to swear to that, am I?"

"Yes."

"And what am I to get for swearing it?"

"You're to get ten dollars."

"Ain't ten dollars pretty small for swearin' a thing like that?"

"I don't think it is."

"Could you make it twenty?"

"I could make it fifteen."

"Make it twenty. Remember I run risks of being sent up for perjury."

"It's small risks."

"But just the same it's risks."

"I suppose it is."

"Make it twenty."

"All right. I'll make it twenty," said Billings.

"Very good. I'll swear then the day after the first thunder and lightning storm that you stopped at my house all night," said Nick Gray.

"That is what you want to do."

"But when do I get my twenty dollars?"

"Three days after the thunder storm."

"Then you're to do some work the night of the thunder storm?"

"I expect to."

"It would be a poor night to rob a house, I should think."

"I ain't goin' to rob no house."

"Then it's work of another sort, whatever it is."

"Yes."

"And you don't get your pay until after it's done?"

"That's the way it's to be."

"Well, then you can count on me."

"All right. I guess I'll go now, Nick Gray."

"Where are you going to?"

"You want to know too much, as you told me a minute ago."

"Then I ain't a bit curious."

"I don't mind telling you, Nick Gray, that I'm going out to lay the way for the work I'm going to do inside of a week."

"Provided there's a thunder storm."

"And there's sure to be a thunder storm inside a week this time of the year."

"Yes."

"Well, so long!" said Billings.

The detective heard the big entrance door of the shop open and then shut.

An instant later he heard some one coming up the stairs.

"It is Nick Gray," he thought.

Then he dodged behind the door, which had been left open.

Nick Gray reached the top of the stairs and looked into the room.

"I'd better put away them things of the James' Boys," muttered Nick, who then stepped into the room and approached the bed upon which the jackets and hats were lying.

As he did so, the detective stole out from behind the door. Then making sure that he had not been observed, Carl Greene stepped softly through the door, and crept silently down the stairs.

In another moment he was at the trap-door, which he pushed outward, and stepped into Nick Gray's back yard.

To make his way through the high bushes that surrounded the yard was the next step taken by Carl Greene.

He glanced in the direction of the tavern, and saw the form of the lank youth who had been talking with Nick Gray, and whom he had seen before in the company of the man called Todd.

The detective saw the youth enter the tavern.

"Billings is going to drink success to his little scheme," thought Carl Greene, who then quickly made his way in the direction of the tavern.

Supper was announced as he entered the bar-room.

"I might as well have a little something to eat while I am waiting for Billings to brace himself up a bit," thought Carl Greene, as he observed the lank youth leaning against the bar and ordering a second drink.

Carl Greene stepped into the supper-room and took a seat. While he was disposing of the meal, a man came up to the table where he was sitting, and said:

"Be you Carl Greene, the detective?"

"Yes."

"I was coming down the road a bit ago and I met Sheriff Timberlake and his posse."

"Which way were they going?"

"They had started up the road, and the sheriff said that if Detective Carl Greene was at Harbeck Corners I was to tell him that the gang had got away from them in some way or other——"

"He didn't say how or where they had got away from him?"

"No; he only said that they had got away from him, and he couldn't track 'em, and had gone back up the main road."

"All right, sir; I am obliged to you," said Carl Greene.

After he had finished his supper the detective strolled out into the bar-room.

Billings had just laid down an empty glass and was paying for a drink.

Carl Greene observed the landlord at the further end of the room and approached him.

"Mr. Detective," said the landlord, offering his hand to Carl Greene, "I found that I was right. The people of Harbeck Corners want to stand by you."

"They do?"

"A dozen of them have offered to guard the tavern to-night?"

"That is good! I suppose they will show up at about dark?"

"That was when they were to be around!"

"Put them on duty then around the hotel when they show up! I have a little business to attend to now; but I'll be back sometime during the evening."

"All right, Carl Greene. You can step in my room in case you want to put on any new disguise!"

"I don't think I'll need any this time; but, thank you all the same," said Carl Greene.

The detective hurried up-stairs, and softly approaching the room in which he had left his prisoners, he unlocked the door without any warning and looked in.

Three of the prisoners were seated upon a bed and the other two upon chairs. It was evident that they had so far made no attempt to escape.

Carl Greene closed the door and locked it. Then he made his way into the bar-room.

As he entered the latter place, he brushed against the landlord.

"Landlord," he said, "if I am not back here by dark, you had better put three or four good men on guard outside the room where I placed the prisoners."

"All right! Do you think the prisoners will try to escape?"

"No; but I don't want any one to get to them."

Landlord Scott nodded his head.

Carl Greene now observed that Billings had left the bar and was arranging his hair in front of a glass in the corner of the room.

"He's getting ready to leave," thought the detective.

A moment later Billings left the tavern and walked slowly down the main road. He had soon left Harbeck's Corners behind.

The detective followed, and had no difficulty in keeping the lank youth in sight.

When the latter was nearly a mile from the village the detective was several hundred yards behind him.

Billings soon turned a bend in the road. As he did so, the detective sat down by the roadside.

"He is a very easy man to follow," thought Carl Greene. "I'll give him a chance to get a little way ahead."

Presently the detective arose, and walked quickly on in the direction of the bend.

After turning this he noticed another bend about a quarter of a mile ahead; but he did not see Billings.

"I will have to make up for lost time," thought Carl Greene, who now walked briskly down the road.

When he had got about a quarter of the way down the stretch he heard a voice close at hand, cry out:

"Hands up!"

Looking in the direction from which the voice had proceeded, Carl Greene saw two pistols pointed at his head. Behind these pistols were two men wearing masks.

Carl Greene was now in the power of Jesse James.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SAFE IN THE WALL.

The ambush of robbers into which the clever detective had stumbled had been passed in safety by Billings.

The bandits had concluded that the lank youth was not worth holding up, and he had been allowed to pass them in safety.

He had turned the next bend in the road before Carl Greene had come up to the point where the bandits were lying in ambush.

Shortly after passing this bend Billings came upon a small road which branched off from the main highway. He turned up the side road, along which he proceeded for about half a mile.

Then he came upon a large, rambling one-story house, that stood close to the roadside.

It was evidently a very old structure and had not been painted in years.

There were two doors, either of which might have answered for the main entrance to the house.

Billings turned in from the road and knocked at one of the doors.

There was no answer, and he went to the other door and knocked.

Presently the door was opened and he saw before him an old lady wearing a lace cap, and dressed neatly although very plainly.

Billings removed his hat, and said:

"I say, ma'am, can you give me something to eat?"

The old lady looked sharply at Billings, and said:

"If you're hungry you had better keep on to Harbeck's Corners. There's a good tavern there."

"I just came from the Corners, ma'am; I was at the balloon ascension there this afternoon; but I was feeling kind of sick then and didn't feel a bit hungry. Now I am all right again, and I tell you I'm dreadful hungry. Besides I'll pay for the meal!"

The old lady thought a moment, and then said:

"I haven't much to offer you. My son and I have had our supper already."

"I don't mind what you give me, ma'am, so long as it's snthin' to eat, 'cause I'm powerful hungry."

"I'll do what I can for you, young man," said the old lady, who now opened the door wide and motioned to Billings to come in.

He entered the house and found himself in a large room which contained scarcely any furniture.

She led the way through the room into a second room which was as bare of furniture as the first.

Then she ushered Billings into a third room which was of about the same size as the other two, and which contained very little furniture.

There was, however, in the center of this room a good-sized table covered with a cloth.

"This must be the dining-room," thought Billings, as he looked around the walls of the apartment. "The door of the safe that Todd told me about ought to be in here somewhere."

The old lady motioned to Billings to take a chair that stood in the corner of the room nearest to the door by which they had entered.

After she had left the room, Billings rose softly and stole around the apartment, examining the walls for the panel which Todd had told him was the door of the safe.

"I don't see any keyhole," he thought, as he made his way back to his chair.

A moment later the old lady made her appearance with a tray, upon which had been placed a bountiful meal of cold meat and bread and butter, together with a cup of hot tea.

She placed these upon the table and invited Billings to draw up his chair.

"My son Jacob ought to be somewhere around," she said, as Billings began his attack upon the food. "You was down at the balloon ascension, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"My son was talking about going, but somehow he didn't manage to get through his work."

Billings gave the old lady an account of the balloon ascension, which seemed to interest her greatly.

After he had finished his meal he took from his pocket a silver dollar, which he handed to the old lady.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"I allers like to pay for my meals, ma'am."

"But I haven't got any change."

"I allers like to pay well for my meals, and I ain't a-going to take any change."

"It's a good deal more than the meal is worth."

"It was worth a good deal more than that to me, ma'am, so don't say a word more about it."

"You believe in paying your way, young man."

"I do, ma'am."

"You're a good deal like my father. He was a Congressman."

A proud look stole into the old lady's face as she said this.

"You say he was a Congressman, ma'am?"

The old lady then proceeded to give him a history of her father, who had been at one time in the House of Representatives.

Billings seemed to be greatly interested in what she said.

"Let me show you some clippings from newspapers of before the war, in which my father is very highly spoken of," she continued.

"I should like very much to see them, ma'am," said Billings.

The old lady drew from her pocket a large key, and going to a panel in the wall near the point where Billings had just seated himself, she found a small hole that had escaped Billings' observation.

This proved to be the keyhole of the safe, of which the panel was the door.

The old lady turned the key and then swung open the panel, revealing a small recess behind it, in which Billings could see a number of books and papers.

Opening one of the books, the old lady took from between the leaves several newspaper clippings which had the appearance of being very old.

Then, leaving the door of the safe open, the old lady took the extracts to the table and read them one after another, making comments as she went along. Billings pretended to be listening intently.

Having gone through the extracts, the old lady replaced them in the book and closed the safe, which she then locked and placed the key in her pocket.

Just then the inner door of the room opened, and a short, thick-set man of middle age entered the room.

He stood at the open door and looked at Billings in surprise.

"Jacob," said the old lady, "this is a young man who is going up to see Peter Parsons, and stopped here to get a bit of supper."

"I've seen you now and then around Harbeck's Corners," said Jacob, "but I never knew your name."

"My name is Billings, and I knew you by name, but I didn't know you lived up this way."

"What is my name now?"

"Jacob Carter."

"You are right. But did you say you were going on up to see Peter Parsons?"

"Yes."

"Peter Parsons ain't at home now."

"Are you sure?"

"He went away last Saturday to be gone three weeks. And more than that, there ain't a soul of his folks at home."

The door by which Jacob Carter had entered the room had been left open.

Billings could see that the room beyond was a large but poorly furnished apartment, like the others he had seen, and it opened upon still another room in which he could make out a cooking range.

Just then he noticed the old lady standing close to her son, into whose ear she began to whisper.

Jacob Carter nodded his head, and whispered loud enough to be heard by Billings:

"I'll go to town to-morrow!"

Then she whispered something of which Billings could only make out these words:

"Dangerous to keep it around!"

Jacob Carter nodded his head.

The old lady then said aloud to her son:

"Jacob, Mr. Billings heard me read those newspaper extracts about father!"

"Did he?"

At that instant a loud noise was heard in one of the adjoining rooms.

"The cat has upset the bread," exclaimed the old lady, dashing from the room closely followed by Jacob Carter.

As she left the room Billings thought that he heard something light strike the floor. He glanced down and saw a key. He bent over and picked this up.

He now recognized it as the key with which the old lady had opened the safe.

He quickly slipped the key into his pocket.

A moment later Mrs. Carter and her son returned.

"The cat didn't upset the bread after all," she explained, "it was only a couple of empty pans."

Billings then thanked the old lady for the supper which she had provided him with.

"It's me that ought to do the thanking," she replied, "because you paid me very handsomely."

The old lady and her son then showed Billings to the door by which he had entered the house.

As she reached the door, Mrs. Carter looked up at the sky and said:

"It looks very much as if we were going to have a thunder storm to-night!"

Billings looked up and saw that the southern horizon was filled with heavy banks of clouds, which wore a very threatening aspect.

"I shouldn't wonder, ma'am; good-night!"

The Carters wished him good-night, and Billings proceeded on up the road.

The sun had set, and it was now growing dark rapidly.

"That was lucky about the key," Billings thought. "From what the old lady said to her son about it's being dangerous to keep something around, I'm satisfied that they've got money in that house; and where do they keep it but in that safe!"

Billings paused a few moments later. It had occurred to him that he might have difficulty in finding the money among the various things the safe contained.

"I have it," he thought, resuming his journey. "I can put everything I find in that safe into one of Peter Parson's feed bags. It's lucky that Peter Parsons is away, and," glancing up at the sky, "it is lucky there's going to be thunder and lightning to-night! I'll hide the things I get from the safe, except the money, and I'll make Todd pay me again for those papers he's so anxious to get rid of. This is about the luckiest day that has ever come to me!"

In the meantime Mrs. Carter and her son re-entered the house. They went into the dining-room where she proceeded to clear away the dishes that Billings had used.

"I am very glad that you have decided to go to town to-morrow. That money ought to have been in the bank long ago," said the old lady, as she paused in her work in order to light a candle.

The old lady now lit another candle which she handed to her son.

"Come, you had better go to bed now," said the old lady, handing one of the lights to her son.

They entered the inner room, from each side of which opened a small bedroom.

After bidding each other "good-night," mother and son separated.

Shortly afterwards the house was still.

The thunderstorm which had threatened to break early in the evening had seemed to disappear.

Then towards midnight the black clouds suddenly reappeared in the southern horizon, and were now more threatening than before.

Presently the sound of thunder was heard in the distance.

Then it grew louder, and was preceded by distant but vivid flashes of lightning.

The old lady and her son slumbered peacefully.

At length the wind began to rattle the blinds of the old house.

The storm sounded nearer and nearer, and at length burst with great fury.

While the blinds and doors were rattling loudly, the back door of the house opened softly and a man, bearing upon his shoulders a sack, entered.

A bright flash soon illuminated the room, and revealed the door at the opposite end. It was open.

Billings made his way across the apartment, and entered the third doorway. Here he paused and waited for another flash of lightning.

One at length came, and was followed immediately by a terrific peal of thunder.

Billings had made out the portion of the wall in which the panel was, and now groped his way in that direction.

At length by feeling carefully along the wall he found a keyhole.

"This is it!" he thought, as he laid down the sack and took from his pocket the key.

He inserted the key in the hole and turned the lock. Then he swung open the door of the safe.

His next move was to empty the contents of his sack, which he did as quietly as possible.

Then came a long and intensely vivid flash of lightning, which revealed to him the innermost recesses of the little safe.

Lifting up the bag he placed it inside the safe.

Then he pushed into the bag the entire contents of the safe.

Having assured himself that he had left out nothing, he took the bag from the safe, and closing the door, locked it.

Then he laid the bag carefully upon the floor close to the wall a short distance away from the heap of pitch pine.

He made his way into the kitchen, the loud patter of the rain upon the roof rendering his footsteps inaudible even to himself.

A long, vivid flash of lightning gave him a good view of the kitchen, and upon a shelf above the range he saw what he took to be a matchbox.

He made his way to the range and finding the shelf, felt along this until he touched the box.

He found that this was nearly full of matches.

Taking a number of these, he made his way back through the two doorways into the room where he had left the pile of wood and where he had plundered the little safe.

A flash of lightning, fainter than the preceding ones, showed him, as he entered this room, the pile of pitch pine. But before he had time to look along the wall for the bag, the flash was over.

He reached the pile of wood and bending down he struck one of his matches against the floor.

It lit, and he applied it to the wood, which caught instantly and began to blaze.

By the light of this blaze Billings looked around for the bag in which he had placed the contents of the safe.

The bag had disappeared.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SLEEPY SENTINELS—THE ESCAPE.

When Carl Greene discovered that he had walked into an ambush, he accepted the situation quietly and held up his hands.

He now realized that he had made a mistake in following Billings without first having put on some good disguise in which he could have deceived even Jesse James, whom he might have expected to meet at any turn of the road.

But it was too late to cry over the matter.

The only thing to do now was to watch for some opportunity of escape.

As he had suspected at the first glance, one of the masked men was Jesse James.

The detective was disarmed and bound within a minute after he had obeyed the order to hold up his hands. He was then led into the woods a short distance by one of the robbers who was acting under the orders of Jesse James.

Presently the bandit chief made his way towards the prisoner, removing his mask as he came along.

"Well, Carl Greene," he said, "this has been a day of surprises, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Say, Carl!"

"What, Jesse?"

"You took three boys of ours prisoners this morning, and I guess that you have taken two more of them prisoners this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"And they are prisoners of yours still?"

"I believe they are."

"We want them."

"I haven't got them with me."

"I didn't say that you had. But I said that we wanted those boys that you took prisoners. Is it in your power to set them free?"

"Do you expect me to go back alone and set those men free?" asked the detective.

"I expect two of my men to go back with you dressed up as countrymen."

"They are to keep with me until the prisoners have been set free."

"They are to keep you well covered with their pistols until such a time as you do set them free."

"And these two disguised men of yours are to pass as fellows I've picked up along the road?"

"If anybody asks you who they are, that's what you are to say."

"And all this while I am to be unarmed, while they have pistols——"

"While they have the drop on you. That's about the size of it, Carl Greene."

"Give me a minute or two to think it over," said the detective.

"Go ahead," added the bandit chief.

"He won't kill me right away," thought Carl Greene. "As long as there is a chance of getting me to set those men of his free, I am safe. With the few men he has now, he will not dare to enter Harbeck's Corners. I am prepared to hold out for awhile, and that means a possibility of escape for me."

"Well, Carl Greene, have you decided whether you want to live or not?" asked Jesse, a moment later.

"If I do decide to set your men free, there would be no use of going to Harbeck's Corners before two or three o'clock in the morning."

"I suppose not."

"Then let me rest until then."

"Do you promise then to exchange those men for yourself?" demanded the bandit chief.

"I am not ready to make any promises now. But very likely I will be after I have had a few hours' sleep," replied the detective.

"Didn't you sleep last night?"

"No; nor the night before that. I am worn out and I need some sleep."

"Take your sleep then. The chances are it will do you good, and when I wake up at two o'clock to-morrow morning you will be in the humor to see what's for your interest."

"Very likely I will," said Carl Greene, lying down upon the grass.

Jesse James called another of his men and directed him to assist in watching the prisoner.

"Keep your pistols ready," said the bandit chief, "and use them on him if he tries to get away or cries out."

The two guards took up positions upon either side of the prisoner and prepared to watch him.

Carl Greene closed his eyes, and soon his slow, regular breathing seemed to indicate that he was sleeping.

Jesse James and the other two bandits went back to a point near the edge of the woods where they had left their horses.

The two guards now prepared to watch their prisoner very carefully.

At length it began to grow dark.

The slow, regular breathing of the detective continued to indicate that he was sleeping.

Some time later one of the guards whispered to the other.

"It is going to be awful tiresome work watching this man all night."

"That's so."

"Suppose I go to sleep for an hour, then you can wake me, and I will watch while you sleep for an hour."

"What's the matter with my having the first sleep?"

"If you let me sleep the first hour you can sleep for an hour and a half."

"Have you got a watch with you?"

"Yes."

"And is it going?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

The other bandit produced his watch, the regular ticking of which indicated that it was running.

"All right," said the other, taking the watch and putting it in his pocket.

His comrade stretched himself comfortably out upon the grass, and in another moment was asleep.

The watcher soon began to yawn wearily, and at length he took out the watch, and lighting a match, looked at the face.

"Only twenty minutes have gone," he muttered.

At length the watcher again began to stretch his arms wearily. He sat down and began to nod his head.

Then suddenly he braced himself up, as if he was determined to keep himself awake.

A moment later he took out his knife, and finding a small piece of wood, he proceeded to whittle a toothpick out of this.

Having completed the work, he laid the knife in his lap with a yawn and tried the toothpick.

Evidently it did not suit him, for he threw it away.

"I can't keep awake sitting down," he muttered.

Then he arose to his feet.

As he arose the knife which he had placed in his lap fell, and striking against a piece of wood glanced over in the direction of the prisoner.

The dropping of the knife was unnoticed by the sleepy watcher.

And the prisoner himself was to all appearances still sound asleep.

Presently the bandit lit another match and looked at the watch.

"If it was only a stem-winder. I'd set the hands ahead," he thought; "but as it is I can do nothing because I have no key."

At length the watcher discovered that his weary hour of vigil was at an end, and he awoke his companion.

"The hour can't be up," growled the awakened man.

A match was lit and by means of its light the doubter was convinced that a quarter of ten o'clock had arrived.

He arose to a sitting posture and said:

"Go ahead, I'll watch."

The other stretched himself upon the ground and fell asleep almost instantly.

The newly awakened watcher made several attempts to keep his eyes open, but each time his lids would close again.

Presently he nodded his head heavily to one side and then started up.

"This won't do!" he muttered.

A moment later, however, he was again nodding his head while his eyes would close almost as soon as he had succeeded in opening the lids.

At length he slowly curled over upon the grass and went to sleep.

Carl Greene's slow, regular breathing now suddenly ceased, and with his bound hands he groped around him in the grass.

At length he found the knife which the bandit who had stood the first watch had dropped.

The knife was still open.

Carl Greene placed the handle in his mouth, and holding it firmly between his teeth he drew back and forth over the blade the cords by which his hands were bound.

These soon parted, and his hands were free. Then he closed the knife with which he had cut his cords and placed it in his pocket.

He now crept to the guard who lay nearest him, and reached for his belt.

He found that his pistol sheath had buried itself in a small hollow underneath him.

It would have been impossible to have gotten at the pistol without awakening the man.

The detective turned and started to crawl toward the other sleeping guard.

At that instant he heard footsteps approaching. He lay down and holding his hands together to give the impression that he was still bound, he again pretended sleep.

Jesse James now came up and found his two guards sleeping. He bent down and shook one of the fellows in order to awaken him.

"What do you mean by this?" demanded the bandit chief in a savage manner of his follower.

The latter sprang up, and grumbled something in self-defense. The other guard who had been caught napping now awoke and jumped up in alarm. The bandit chief looked from one to the other and exclaimed:

"A pretty pair you are to leave in charge of a prisoner!"

"But he's here, ain't he?" grumbled the guard who had just been awakened.

The other guard muttered something to the same effect.

"He's here; but no thanks to you!" muttered Jesse James.

Carl Greene now pretended to awake, and rising to a sitting posture, he said:

"See here, Jesse James, this ain't right treatment! I'm entitled to my sleep, and it isn't fair to wake me up this way."

Having said this Carl Greene lay down again and pretended to go asleep.

Jesse James whispered to the two guards.

"I suppose that I will have to do the watching myself."

One of the robbers, who had remained by the roadside, now came up and said:

"Jesse James, there is an old woman who lives with her son in an old-fashioned house about half a mile up the road that branches off from the main highway a little further down."

"Do you think they are worth robbing?"

"I am sure they have got money, and lots of it."

"Very well, we will go up there—say a little before midnight."

"All right."

"And when we do go, we will tie the prisoner to a tree; there would be no use in leaving any one to watch him," continued Jesse James.

"Why not tie him up now?" asked one of the men who had gone to sleep.

"I prefer that you should watch him," replied the bandit chief; "and meanwhile I will watch you in order to see that you do your work properly."

Jesse James now seated himself upon the grass, and taking out a pipe proceeded to fill it and light it.

The robber who had told him about the old woman and her son went back to the side of the road in order to join the others in watching the highway.

At length Jesse James arose, and said:

"We are going to have a thunder storm. It is fixing for it fast there in the south, and unless I am very much mistaken it is going to be a heavy one."

Carl Greene heard this, and thought:

"The chances are that the villain Billings is starting for the house in order to set fire to it!"

Jesse James now gave a low whistle.

The two men who had been watching by the roadside now came up.

"There is going to be a thunder storm," said the bandit chief. "And the question is whether we had better rob the house during the storm or wait until some other time?"

"We had better rob it at once," said the bandit who had proposed the matter to Jesse James and who was to guide them to the house.

"Then we will tie the prisoner to a tree!" said the bandit chief, who then bent over Carl Greene and shook him.

The detective started up as if he was greatly annoyed at being awakened from his sleep.

"We have got to tie you up to a tree," said Jesse James, "while we go and attend to a matter in our line of business. We found it necessary to make a few changes in our plans."

"You ain't living up to your bargain, Jesse James," grumbled the detective, rising slowly to his feet, but holding his hands as closely together as if they were bound.

Jesse James selected a small tree, and pushing Carl Greene against this tied him to the trunk, taking several turns of the cord about his arms and his waist, and also a few turns about his knees.

The bandit chief seemed to take it for granted that Carl Greene's hands were still bound.

"I guess we've got you fixed now!" said he, "as far as your getting away goes! The only danger now is of your crying out."

Jesse then took from his pocket a handkerchief with which he gagged Carl Greene.

"I'm sorry to leave you this way to run the chances of getting soaked, for I'm afraid that a heavy thunder storm is coming up," said Jesse, as he turned away from his prisoner.

"Come, boys," he added; "if we want to get to the house before the storm begins, we haven't much time to spare."

The outlaw chief now started in the direction of the road, followed by his men. A moment later they mounted their horses.

The thunder now began to rumble in the distance.

Carl Greene assured himself that the robbers had turned into the road.

He then pushed up the cords that were about his waist until he was able to use his forearms freely.

Then he took out the knife which the robber had dropped, and by means of which he had freed his hands, and quickly cut the cords with which Jesse James had bound him to the tree.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEATING OFF THE BANDITS.

The detective, having freed himself, stole silently through the woods, keeping himself at some little distance from the road.

He was able to guide himself by the sounds of the hoofs of the bandits' horses.

The latter were going quite slowly, as their riders seemed to find it necessary to proceed with caution, owing to the darkness.

Presently they turned up the branch road that led towards the house which they intended to rob.

Thunder was now heard frequently, and flashes of lightning would occasionally illuminate the wood.

"I must get the lead of them," thought Carl Greene, breaking into a run.

In a few moments he turned into the road some distance ahead of the robbers.

The lightning now revealed his path at frequent intervals, and he was able to make rapid progress.

Soon the storm burst upon him, taking him almost off his feet. He kept on and in a few moments saw by means of a vivid flash of lightning the old house by the roadside.

"This must be the place," he muttered, as he made his way to the porch.

He tried the first door that he came to and found this was locked.

"Billings said that the back door would be open," he thought.

He then went around to the back door and softly opened this.

Then he entered, and closing the door as quietly as he had opened it, he made his way across the kitchen, the lightning having revealed to him the direction in which the opposite door lay.

He groped his way through the second room, but brought up against the wall a short distance from the door which he had been trying to reach.

Just then he saw a figure moving through the doorway. He crouched down and saw the figure make its way through the room.

It was Billings going in search of the matches.

After the latter had left the room, the detective stepped through

the doorway into the apartment in which Billings had placed the pile of pitch pine by which he proposed to burn the house.

A long flash of lightning revealed to the detective the pile of firewood and the sack in which Billings had placed the contents of the safe.

Carl Greene crept forward and felt of the bag.

"Books and papers, eh?" thought the detective; "and perhaps money."

He picked up the bag and groped his way toward the further door of the apartment. As he did so he thought:

"So Billings intended to carry off everything, and to demand double pay from his employer, Todd? For some reason or other, he is not yet ready to set fire to the place. But he can't have given up the notion of carrying out that portion of Todd's plans."

Just then Billings entered the room upon his return from the kitchen. A flash of lightning revealed his figure.

The detective stepped back from the doorway, and laid down the bag in the adjoining room.

"It will be safer here," he thought.

The detective waited, and an instant later saw Billings light a match and set fire to the heap of pitch pine wood.

As Billings looked around him for the missing bag the detective walked up to him, and delivered upon the back of the scoundrel's head a blow that laid him senseless upon the floor.

Then springing forward, Carl Greene pulled apart the pile of burning wood, and stamping upon the pieces, soon succeeded in extinguishing all of them except one which had caught fire only at one end.

"This will answer for a torch," he said to himself, as he proceeded to look about the room.

"The sleeping rooms must be further back—very likely off the next room."

Carl Greene stepped into the next room, and by the light of the torch saw the doors of the two sleeping apartments. He ran to one of the doors and beat upon it with his fist.

At first there was no answer.

Then the detective gave the door several more vigorous strokes with his fist. Then he heard the voice of a man. It cried:

"What's the matter?"

"Robbers are coming to attack this house!"

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

"I'll be with you in a minute."

"Are there any other men in the house?"

"No."

An instant later the door of the room opened, and Jacob Carter appeared half dressed.

Just then the door of the opposite sleeping room opened, and Mrs. Carter put out her head which was nearly covered by a large old-fashioned night-cap. She exclaimed:

"What's the matter?"

In a few words Carl Greene explained to Jacob Carter and to his mother what had happened.

"Have you any pistols?" asked the detective.

"I have two," replied Jacob Carter, going into his room.

An instant later he returned with two fully loaded revolvers in his hand. One of these he gave to Carl Greene.

Just then the old lady appeared, having thrown over her shoulders a loose wrapper.

"I wish you had another pistol for me," she exclaimed.

The old lady was evidently game.

"Perhaps we may find one on the young scoundrel in the next room," said Carl Greene.

The latter led the way with his torch into the adjoining room, upon the floor of which still lay the inanimate form of Billings.

As Carl Greene bent over in order to examine his pockets, Mrs. Carter said:

"Only to think that he was such a villain, when he seemed to enjoy listening to some newspaper extracts about my father that I read to him."

The old lady sighed as she said this.

Carl Greene found a revolver, fully loaded, in the pockets of Billings. He handed the pistol to the old lady who said:

"You'll find that I know how to use this."

Then Jacob Carter picked up the bag, and placing it in the safe, shut the door of this, and after locking it gave the key to his mother.

Carl Greene with Jacob Carter and the old lady then proceeded to the front door by which Billings had first entered the house.

Mrs. Carter unlocked the door, and was about to open it when Carl Greene said:

"Wait a minute. The light would make us a mark for the robbers."

Having said this, he carefully extinguished the torch.

The old lady then slowly opened the door.

The rain had suddenly ceased, and a break in the clouds revealed

a few stars in the southern horizon. The wind had almost died out.

Carl Greene listened.

The splash of horses making their way along the road, which had been partially flooded by the heavy rain, could now be plainly heard.

"They are coming," said Jacob Carter.

"And they will find us ready for them," exclaimed the old lady.

The splashing of the approaching horses became louder, and a moment later the sharp eyes of Carl Greene could make out the five bandits who had turned in from the road.

"It is time to give them warning that they are in danger!" whispered Carl Greene, raising his pistol and pointing it toward the approaching bandits.

His example was followed by the old lady and her son.

"Fire!" whispered Carl Greene.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Three bullets whizzed over the heads of the bandits. One of the bullets grazed the nose of the animal which was ridden by Jesse James. The horse snorted in a frightened manner and reared up into the air.

The bandit chief by a vigorous pull upon the reins brought the frightened animal to its senses.

"They were prepared for us," muttered Jesse James, as he drew his revolver.

Bang!

Bang!

Bang!

Again Carl Greene and his two companions had fired at the bandits. This time a bullet whizzed through the hat of Jesse James, while another grazed the cheek of one of the other robbers, drawing blood.

"Fire at them!" whispered Jesse.

The bandits drew their pistols, and pointing in the direction in which they had seen the flashes, fired.

Two bullets flew in through the open door over the heads of the defenders of the house, while three more bullets were embedded in the door sill.

"Dismount!" cried the bandit chief, reining in his horse.

Again three shots were fired from the doorway of the house.

Two bullets whizzed by the ear of the bandit chief, who now observed that his men had found the fire too hot, and were showing a disposition to draw back.

"Come on!" cried Jesse James, brandishing his revolver above his head, and then leaping boldly to the ground.

In the meantime, Carl Greene and his companions had again cocked their revolvers.

"Fire!" whispered the detective.

The report of three pistol shots rang out upon the night air.

The bullets passed over the head of Jesse James and whizzed close to the ears of his five men.

The latter wheeled around their horses and rode out into the highway.

Jesse uttered an exclamation of anger, and, mounting his horse started in the direction of his men.

He had ridden but a few paces, when three more bullets whizzed after him, one passing between his left arm and his body.

"What's the matter?" he cried, as he came up with his men.

"The fire is too hot!" exclaimed the fellow who had dropped the knife, by means of which Carl Greene had liberated himself.

"They were prepared for us," said the man who had first proposed to rob the house, "and it will take a long siege to capture that place. I wouldn't have proposed coming here, had I thought the place would be defended."

Jesse thought a moment, and then said in a low voice:

"I guess you are right. We must go back to Harbeck's Corners and release our men. Then we can return in the early morning and capture this place. There must be something of value here, judging from the way they have been defending the house."

Having said this, the bandit chief turned down the road, followed by his men.

CHAPTER XVII.

WALKING INTO A TRAP.

As soon as the bandits had ridden off, Carl Greene said to Jacob Carter:

"Have you got a room where you can lock up this fellow Billings?"

"Yes."

"Then lock him up and keep good watch over him for a day or two."

"Then you will be back?"

"Yes; and I will take charge of him and land him safely in some jail that will hold him. I will then hunt up an accomplice of his named Todd, and I hope to see the two of them behind the bars. I am a detective, as you may have suspected."

In a few words Mrs. Carter explained to Carl Greene the way in which Todd was to have been benefited by the burning of the contents of the safe. She also told the detective that she and her son had intended to go to town in the morning in order to have the will proved, and also to deposit the money.

Carl Greene thought a moment, and then said:

"Then start for town in the morning. But first lock up this Billings."

Jacob Carter made his way quickly to his room, where he lit his candle. He then returned and led the way to a good sized closet, which opened off from the first of the large, unfurnished rooms. Carl Greene glanced into the closet and said:

"This will answer. Tie his hands and lock him in here with a little bread and water. He will be safe enough until I come back to take him to jail. I must be back to Harbeck's Corners at once, as my presence may be needed there. I will take the liberty of borrowing the pistol that you loaned me."

Carl Greene took his leave of the old lady and her worthy son, and quickly left the house.

Turning into the road, he ran along it as rapidly as its sloppy condition would admit of.

At length he turned into the woods and made a circuit, by means of which he avoided the neighborhood in which the bandits had held him a prisoner.

He supposed that their first move would be to go back to the point at which they had left him tied when they started out to rob the house.

"And when they find that I have escaped," he thought, "they will look around for me. But if I can help it, they won't look in the right direction for me."

He made his circuit a wide one, and at length struck the main highway some distance nearer Harbeck's Corners than the point at which Jesse James had captured him.

"After all," he thought, as he made his way along the muddy road, "I have accomplished what I started out for, and gained some valuable information besides. I tripped up Billings, and I found out just where Jesse James and the remnant of his band are. So that we will know in what direction to look for an attack from them."

Carl Greene had proceeded but a short distance further when he heard the sound of horsemen coming up behind him. He paused and listened.

"It must be the gang," he muttered. "I had not supposed that they would attempt to ride into Harbeck's Corners so short-handed."

Carl Greene plunged into the wood and made his way among the trees for a distance of about a hundred yards.

"They will be looking along the roadside," he thought, "and it will be a good move to keep well back."

Five horsemen soon came up, riding slowly.

It was Jesse James and his men. They were watching closely on either side of the road, as Carl Greene had supposed they would.

The detective stood in a swampy place while the bandits were riding by.

After they had passed, Carl Greene attempted to raise his right foot, intending to hurry back to the road.

He found to his surprise that his foot had caught in the mud.

Then he tried to lift the other foot, but that also was fast in the mud.

For several moments the detective strove to release his feet.

Then he discovered that he was sinking gradually into the mud. The truth now suddenly dawned upon him.

Beneath the layer of mud into which he had stepped lay quicksands, into which he was slowly but steadily sinking.

At length he heard a noise in the distance.

At first this was faint.

"It does not sound like horses' hoofs," he thought. "What can it be?"

The noise grew louder and louder.

Carl Greene muttered:

"It is another storm coming up. While it is raging no one passing along the road could hear my calls."

But although Carl Greene had practically given himself up for lost, he still was calm.

The bold detective had coolly taken many risks during his career. He had been in the presence of death so often that he had grown to look upon it with something like contempt.

The approaching storm grew louder and louder. It was traveling with the speed of a whirlwind.

Suddenly it burst over the forest, swaying the great trees and roaring like an avalanche. Great drops of rain began to fall.

A vivid flash of lightning revealed to Carl Greene the highway,

along which he could see a horseman riding rapidly. The detective cried out, but his voice was lost in the howling of the storm, which would have drowned a dozen voices.

A loud burst of thunder followed the lightning.

The detective had now sank up to his armpits in the treacherous quicksands.

Then came a blinding flash of lightning, followed by a terrific crash, which was almost instantly lost in a fearful peal of thunder, which seemed to shake the very quicksands into which Carl Greene was sinking slowly but surely.

The crash had been caused by a huge limb from one of the tall trees of the forest. The limb had been torn off by the tremendous force of the electric current, and now came tumbling to the ground.

One end of the limb struck a vigorous young sapling, and bent it over until it brushed against the hat of Carl Greene.

The detective instantly realized that the aid had come to him from an unexpected source. He reached up his hands and seized with an iron grip the sapling which had been thrown within his reach.

He pulled with all his strength.

An instant later the huge limb which had struck and bent over the sapling rolled off the latter, and in falling, narrowly escaped striking and crushing in the head of Carl Greene.

The sapling, having been freed from the weight of the limb, would have instantly sprang into its former position had it not been held back by Carl Greene.

The latter clung to it with all his strength.

Presently he noticed that the sapling was moving slowly upward. Then he found that the quicksands were losing their grip upon him.

Then a cracking noise announced the fact that the strain upon the sapling had proved too great.

It was breaking.

But it had already been the means of saving him.

It had enabled him to free himself from the deadly grasp of the quicksands.

He now succeeded in climbing upon the broken sapling. Then he sprang upon firm ground.

The rain now suddenly increased into a heavy downpour. Carl Greene stood up and allowed the rain to drench through his clothing, because at the same time it was washing from him the mud and dirt that he had brought with him from the quicksands.

Presently the rain slackened up and Carl Greene made his way out to the road, along which he now hurried in the direction of Harbeck's Corners.

As he made his way quickly up the road, the detective said to himself:

"It was a bold move of Jesse James to ride into Harbeck's Corners as he did. Still he may attempt some trick. There is no telling what he may be up to."

An instant later, as Carl Greene turned a sharp bend in the road, he came upon five horsemen, who were grouped at the edge of the highway.

Before the detective could draw his pistol, he was covered by several revolvers, and he heard the voice of Jesse James cry out:

"Hands up!"

Carl Greene found himself again in the power of the outlaw chieftain. To have shown resistance would have meant instant death to him, so he quietly held up his hands in obedience to the bandit's summons.

Jesse James alighted, and, producing a small rope, proceeded to bind the hands of Carl Greene, while the latter was kept covered by the pistols of the other bandits.

"I thought that we'd come across you again to-night," said the bandit chief.

"You thought right, then," replied Carl Greene.

"How did you get away?"

"I walked away part of the time. The rest of the time I ran away."

Jesse James gave a sneer, and said:

"You are very smart."

"I wouldn't have got away from you, Jesse James, if I hadn't been smart."

"But if you had been very smart, you wouldn't have let me catch you so soon again."

"You see that I didn't want to let you go into the town without me."

"You have carried your point there, for you shall have the pleasure of going into Harbeck's Corners with us."

"Thanks!"

"I notice that you got pretty well soaked during the rain storm."

"Didn't you get wet, too?"

"Not so wet as you did, because we were partially under cover."

"When the last shower began I was almost entirely under cover," said Carl Greene.

"Your clothes don't show it. Why, you have got a revolver in

your pocket!" exclaimed the bandit chief, taking possession of the pistol with which Carl Greene had been provided by the Carters.

"I find it necessary to go armed when the James Boys are around," replied Carl Greene.

"And here is a knife and some loose cartridges," continued Jesse James, as he searched further in the pockets of Carl Greene.

"Had I expected to find you here," replied Carl Greene, "I would have let loose the contents of some of those cartridges."

"Boys," said Jesse James, turning to his companions, "I believe that this detective was among the crowd that defended that house up in the woods."

"I shouldn't at all wonder if he was," said one of the other bandits.

"Come, Carl Greene," said Jesse James, "get upon my horse, and you shall ride into Harbeck's Corners with the boss of the James' gang."

Carl Greene, assisted by the bandit chief, climbed up into the saddle of the latter. Jesse then mounted behind his prisoner.

The party then rode on in the direction of Harbeck's Corners. Presently the lights of the tavern could be seen.

"I see that they are still on watch," said the bandit chief.

Jesse reined in his horse, and, leaping to the ground, he assisted the prisoner to alight.

The bandit chief then ordered two of his men to alight. These were the two who had gone to sleep early in the night while watching Carl Greene.

"Carl Greene," said Jesse, "will you promise to obey my directions?"

The detective shook his head and said:

"What is the use of my promising? You could not expect me to obey your orders if I could avoid it. If I made you the promise, it would be with the understanding that I obey you only if I couldn't get out of it."

"Well, in this case you won't be able to get out of it."

"Perhaps not."

"These two men will follow close at your heels. They will pass as countrymen without any disguise, although I had intended to fix them up a bit."

"Then, if any one asks me who they are, I am to explain that they are a couple of friends whom I have picked up along the road."

"That is what you are to say. And you are to go to the room where my men are and unlock the door."

"Then you will untie my hands?"

"No. You are to hold your hands down as you go along to the door. When you get there you will be able to unlock the door with your hands as they are."

"But what if I haven't got the key with me?"

"I know very well that you have the key with you," said the bandit, putting his hands into Carl Greene's pockets and finding the key of the room in which he had locked up the prisoners.

Jesse James placed this key in the bound right hand of the detective and said:

"You can unlock the door all right. Don't say that this is not the key of the room in which our boys are prisoners, because I know that it is."

Carl Greene made no reply to this.

"When you have unlocked the door, your guards here will tell the prisoners what to do. Your duty will be over when you unlock the door," continued Jesse.

"And you expect your men to escape the guards without much difficulty?"

"I do."

"And these two men who are to escort me to the place where I am to liberate their comrades are to keep me covered with their pistols?"

"They are to shoot you down if you disobey my orders to you in any particular. But you needn't make such a fuss about obeying my orders. Practically you are only exchanging yourself for five of my men. And to be honest, I think you are worth them. You ought to consider that as a high compliment."

"I do."

Carl Greene and his two guards proceeded to the tavern, outside of which they saw about a dozen men armed with revolvers and pacing up and down.

The detective held down his hands so that the fact that these were bound was not likely to be noticed. He glanced around him and observed that each of his two guards appeared to be ready to draw a revolver and fire at him if he should fail to carry out Jesse James' directions.

At the door of the tavern the detective met Landlord Scott, who said:

"You come back pretty late, Detective Greene."

"Yes; I was delayed longer than I expected."

"Who are these men with you?"

"Friends of ours whom I picked up along the road."

"No attack has been made on us as yet, and I guess you will find your prisoners all right."

"I feel easy on that score, landlord."

"Are you going up to take a look at them?"

"Yes."

"You will find four of our men mounting guard in the hallway as you directed."

"That is right."

Carl Greene went up-stairs, followed by his two guards, who were watching him very closely.

Four men were walking up and down the hallway.

"You are the detective?" said one of them to Carl Greene.

"Yes."

"I think that you will find your prisoners all right."

"I have no doubt of it."

Carl Greene tried the door of the room next to the one in which he had lodged his prisoners.

He found this door locked.

"Is that the room where you left the prisoners?" asked one of the Harbeck's Corners' men.

"No," replied the detective. "They are in a room that opens off from this one."

The detective entered the room, followed closely by his two bandit guards.

Then Carl Greene turned suddenly and darted out of the room.

To slam the door shut and brace his body against it was but the work of an instant.

The two men whom Jesse James had sent to watch Carl Greene had walked into a trap.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONCLUSION.

"I have two more of the robbers inside!" cried Carl Greene to the men who were guarding the hallway.

They looked at the detective in astonishment.

"Look at my wrists!" continued Carl Greene, holding up his hands.

One of the men produced a knife, with which he quickly severed the cord by which Carl Greene's hands had been bound.

The detective then asked for a pistol.

One of the men offered his revolver, which was accepted.

Pounding on the door with the butt of his revolver, Carl Greene called out:

"Will you surrender?"

"Yes!" replied one of the bandits.

"Then hand out your pistols."

"All right," was the reply.

Carl Greene partially opened the door, and the two bandits handed out their pistols.

"Come out yourselves," said Carl Greene, taking the two surrendered pistols and returning the revolver which he had borrowed to its owner.

The two bandits came out of the room and were instantly seized. The pieces of the severed cord, by means of which Carl Greene's hands had been tied, answered to bind the hands of the two new prisoners.

"Which room have you got the other prisoners in?" asked one of the recruits from Harbeck's Corners.

"In the next room," replied Carl Greene. "I will put these fellows in to keep them company."

"The other prisoners have kept mighty quiet the last hour or so," said the other.

Carl Greene produced his key, and, unlocking the door, swung it open. One of the recruits held up a light, and Carl Greene looked into the room.

It was empty.

Frank James, Clell Miller, Wood Hite, Carl Haight and Dick Little, the five prisoners of whose capture the detective had been justly proud, had made their escape.

Carl Greene seized the light, and hurrying into the room, made a hasty examination of the place.

The room contained no window, and the detective at first did not observe anything to indicate that the prisoners had made a hole through the wall.

But upon moving the bed he found an opening in the wall which had the appearance of having been dug out.

Carl Greene climbed through the opening and found himself in a small bedroom, the door of which was securely locked.

The window of this room was open. Carl Greene examined the open window, and found hanging out of it a rope made out of strips of bed-clothing which had been knotted together. The window overlooked the back yard of the tavern.

"This is the way they made their escape," said Carl Greene, as he pulled in the hastily constructed rope and examined it closely.

The detective made his way through the opening in the wall, and

found that the two men whom he had captured but a little before had made their escape in the excitement of the moment.

"They might as well go and join their companions," said Carl Greene. "Those two were of little account, and I should have been ashamed to have carried them alone to the Lexington jail."

The landlord of the tavern now made his appearance, and the detective explained to him how the prisoners had made their escape.

"Landlord, was the room through which they made their escape a vacant one?" asked Carl Greene.

"Just at present it was vacant; but it is hired by the year by a miserly old fellow named Kipton, who comes here for a week every now and then. When he goes away he always takes the key with him."

Carl Greene then left the tavern and went cautiously back to the place where he had last seen Jesse James.

As he approached this he heard the tramp of horses some little distance further up the road.

"The gang has reunited," muttered Carl Greene, "and I shall have to begin all over again the work of capturing the scoundrels. But sooner or later I shall regain every inch of my lost ground."

The gang had been reunited, as Carl Greene had surmised.

After the detective had looked in upon his prisoners just before starting out upon the track of Billings, Dick Little had said:

"I don't imagine he will look in upon us again for some little time."

"I agree with you," said Frank James; "but all the same we will be locked up just as safely as if Carl Greene were bobbing his head in here every minute or two."

"There you are off, Frank."

"I won't feel bad, Wood Hite, if you will show me where I'm wrong."

"Your hands are bound, ain't they?"

"Yes; the same as yours, only you have handcuffs on, while I have common, every-day cord."

"I can't get my hands in my pockets very well, Frank," continued Wood Hite; "no more could you get your hands in your own pockets."

"That's so."

"But you could get your hands in my pockets."

"I suppose that I could."

"Then put them there."

"Will I find anything to pay me for my trouble?"

"If you try the hip-pocket of my trousers you will find a small key."

"What will the key fit?"

"Not the door."

"I suppose not."

"But unless I am very much off it will fit those handcuffs that I've got on, and that Dick Little and Carl Haight have got on."

Frank James inserted his broad hand in the pocket that Wood Hite had indicated, and found a small key.

"Where did you get this key?" said Frank, as he handed the article to Wood.

Bill Catlin gave it to me once, and told me that it would pick the lock of almost any handcuff."

"Where did Bill Catlin get it?"

"That's more than I can tell you. Here, Dick Little, hold up your handcuffs and I will see what I can do with them."

Dick Little held up his handcuffs, and Wood Hite went to work upon the lock of these with the key which Bill Catlin had given him.

After a few vain attempts the lock flew back and Dick Little found his hands free.

Dick then took the key, and soon succeeded in unlocking the handcuffs which bound the wrists of Wood Hite. The latter then took the key and turned his attention to Carl Haight, the lock of whose handcuffs was soon picked.

Wood Hite then untied the cord which bound the hands of Frank, while Carl Haight unfastened the cord upon the wrists of Clell Miller.

Frank tried the door.

"It is locked tight," he muttered.

"And the room has no window," said Clell.

"But perhaps the next one has," said Carl Haight.

"But how are we going to get into the next room?" demanded Clell.

"Carl, I see what you are driving at," said Frank. "You think that we can put a small door into the wall that's between us and the next room?"

"That was my idea," said Carl Haight.

"I suppose the handcuffs will do to begin digging at the plaster with," said Frank.

"They ought to."

"Very well. But where had we better begin working?"

"Behind the bed. Shove it out from the wall, and we will begin where the headboard now is."

"And if we hear any one coming we can shove in the bed and hide our work."

"That is the idea."

The bed was pulled out, and Frank James, Wood Hite and Dick Little took the three sets of handcuffs and began to scoop out the plaster as quietly as they were able to.

Carl Haight stood at the door and listened intently.

The three men with the handcuffs worked steadily, but their progress was very slow.

At length Carl Haight relieved Dick Little, while Clell Miller took his place and listened at the door.

Finally Clell Miller whispered:

"Some one is coming."

Instantly the work ceased, and the bed was thrust back against the wall.

The approaching footsteps were those of the four volunteers who had been assigned to keep watch in the hallway. They soon began to pace up and down the hall and to talk with each other.

"Those fellows will not look in here," whispered Frank James. "I don't think they have the key of the room. We might as well resume our work, but we must do it very quietly."

The bed was pulled out from the wall, and the bandits resumed their work upon the plaster.

At length they reached the laths.

"How are we going to get through these without being heard by those fellows outside?" whispered Dick Little to Frank James.

Just then they heard the sound of distant thunder.

"A storm is coming up," whispered Frank James, "and we can do our heavy work during the peals of thunder."

The thunder soon grew louder and more frequent. During each of the heavy peals they pounded heavily upon the laths, and the sound of this was lost in the roaring of the thunder.

At length the storm ceased; but although a breach had been made in the wall, it was not yet large enough for a man to crawl through.

The bandits continued their work after the storm had ceased, but they could now do little without running great risks of making themselves heard by the men who were mounting guard in the hallway.

"It will take us hours yet," whispered Wood Hite.

At length the second storm came up. And during the height of this, by a few well-directed blows, the bandits succeeded in enlarging the breach to a size which enabled them to pass through it with ease.

One by one they made their way into the next room. The last man who climbed through was Frank James.

After passing through, he reached back and pulled up the bed until it covered the opening.

The window of the room which they had entered was soon opened by the bandits, who found that it overlooked the back yard of the tavern.

"All that we need now is a rope," said Clell.

"And we can soon make a rope," said Frank, going to the bed and pulling off the clothing.

Selecting a quilt, he ripped this open. As he did so, a small piece of paper fluttered out from the torn quilt.

"Find a match, boys, and strike it," whispered Frank. "But first pull down the window shade."

The window shade was pulled down by Dick Little. Wood Hite groped his way to the bureau, where he found a safe full of matches. Taking one, he struck it.

By the light of this Frank found that the piece of paper which had fallen out of the quilt was a one hundred dollar bill.

"Keep on lighting the matches," whispered Frank.

Wood Hite lit match after match, while the others tore the quilt into strips. It was found to contain fifty one hundred dollar bills, which the miser Kipton had sewed there, imagining, no doubt, that it would be safer there than it would be in a bank.

"I wonder who is the miser who left these five thousand dollars here?" whispered Wood Hite.

"I don't know," replied Frank James, "and as long as we have the money, it don't make any difference to us. Five thousand dollars will be a nice little sum for us to divide."

The bandits knotted together the slips of the quilt that had yielded them such a handsome sum of money, and by means of this rope made their way down into the back yard of the tavern.

They soon gained the highway outside of the limits of Harbeck's Corners, and had started down the road, when they ran upon Jesse and his two remaining members of the gang.

Jesse James was very glad to see the five escaped prisoners and to learn that they had brought him five thousand dollars.

"Boys, we will have to leave for the present the two men that I sent with Carl Greene," said the bandit chief. "The detective won't take them to jail just yet, and we will have time to look for them after we get our horses. We had better go and find Nick first now. Perhaps he can tell us where Sired and Jim McGowan are."

They were preparing to start up the road when the two men

who had gone with Carl Greene came up and explained how they had been taken prisoners and had made their escape.

There were now ten men, with only five horses, and the bandits were obliged to double up. The gang then made its way to Nick Gray's blacksmith shop.

They woke up Nick Gray, who told them that he had left Siroc and Jim Malone in an old stable just off the highway, a short distance beyond the point where the "deep swamp" began.

The gang made their way up the road, and soon ran upon three horsemen, whom they held up. The three men had no money, but the bandits robbed them of their horses and left them to make their way to Harbeck's Corners on foot.

At the stable which Nick Gray had mentioned they found Siroc and Jim Malone, who welcomed their masters with loud neighs of pleasure.

Jesse James decided that the best move for the gang to make now would be to return to the old house in the woods, from which he had been beaten back the previous night, and to rob the place.

The bandits rode around the edge of the swamp, and soon struck a path which led them around Harbeck's Corners and brought them out into the main highway beyond that village.

It was broad daylight before they reached the old house. They found the place empty, and a thorough search of it failed to reveal any money. They found, however, material for a good breakfast, which they cooked.

The gang then made its way to the hut where they had left Jim Cummins and the other wounded bandit.

Carl Greene had started to town early that morning in charge of

Billings. He was accompanied by Mrs. Carter and Jacob Carter. Mrs. Carter had no difficulty in proving the will which secured to her daughter Lydia the property that Todd had conspired to place in the hands of Ike Carter.

Jacob Carter placed his money in the bank.

Billings was lodged in jail, and a few weeks later was tried and was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for burglary.

Carl Greene wrote to Todd, telling him that he would be prosecuted for conspiracy. The rascally lawyer was so frightened that he fled from Missouri and settled down under an assumed name in New Orleans.

Carl Greene also wrote to Nick Gray that he was in danger of being prosecuted for conspiracy. The frightened blacksmith hurriedly decamped from Harbeck's Corners.

The miser Kipton, upon returning to Harbeck's Corners, was prostrated with grief over the loss of the money which he had sewed in the quilt. Although the miser had fifty thousand dollars sewed up in other quilts in different parts of Missouri, he never recovered from the loss of the five thousand which the James gang had robbed him of. The poor miser died of a broken heart one month from the day on which he learned of the robbery.

After the conviction of Billings, Carl Greene returned, in order to resume his search after the James gang. He found that they had suddenly left their old haunts.

"They have found fresh fields for their rascally labors," thought the bold detective. "But I will follow them wherever they have gone, and I will yet capture them."

THE END.

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